Helping Children Cope with Stress & Trauma

Partners for a Healthy Baby Home Visiting Curriculum

What are the protective factors that buffer the trauma?

Resilience

Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty & Disaster

Trauma Resilience Scale for Children

Dr. Mimi A. Graham, Florida State University
Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy
Resiliency Factors

- I knew that there was someone to take care of me & protect me.
- There was someone in my family who helped me feel that I was important or special.
- I felt loved.
- People in my family looked out for each other.

Today's World is a Scary Place

Checking In With Our Families

- Since the last time I saw you, has anything really scary or upsetting happened to you (your child) or anyone in your family?*
- Are there any behavior problems with your child at home, at child care or in your neighborhood?*
- How do you feel about your child's current behavior?
- How do you, as a parent, deal with stress?

Understand that Babies Feel Stress Too

- Babies can be hurt by stress. The brain and body can't focus on growing and learning when energy is constantly needed to cope with stress.
- Babies may get stressed when:
  - they get over-tired
  - they get over-stimulated (too many people, too much light or noise)
  - their routines change often
  - they are separated from a parent or familiar caregiver
  - they are startled by loud noises or other unexpected things like clowns, people in masks and costumes (even Santa!)
  - they sense that those around them are stressed – especially Mom and Dad!
  - they witness arguing or violence
  - they are left alone for long periods of time

Babies have different ways of showing their stress:

- crying, screaming, or having a "melt down" or tantrum
- trying to soothe themselves by sucking their fingers or twirling their hair
- withdrawing, looking away, or trying to hide
- not eating
- easily frightened
- sleep troubles, nightmares
- headaches, stomach aches
- skill regression (reverting back to baby talk)
- sadness/no joy

Have you noticed what situations cause stress for your baby?
What signs does your baby show?
How can you reduce stress for your baby?
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Interpreting Children’s Behaviors

Children Learn to Handle Difficulties by Imitation

...in negative or positive ways.

Helping Children Deal With Stress & Trauma

Free Download:
https://cpeip.fsu.edu/trauma/resources/HelpChildrenDealWithTrauma.pdf
1. Safe Harbor

A feeling of physical and emotional safety

I wonder why is this child responding this way?

An Infant Mental Health Approach gives us a new sense of compassion to help families understand the emotional needs underlying the behavior.

Instead of asking: “How can we change her behavior?”

Let’s ask: “How can we help her feel safe, secure, and calm?”

The Emotional Life of the Toddler

A temper tantrum is an exquisite display of stress that exceeds ones' ability to cope.

Dr. Alicia Leiberman

Dr. Mimi A. Graham, Florida State University
Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy
Levels of Stress

- Normal Stress
- Tolerable Stress: Adversity managed through effective coping skills that are facilitated by supportive adults
- Toxic Stress: Stress that was tolerable with a supportive adult becomes toxic in the absence of the buffering protection of supportive and responsive adult caregiver

Stress is made tolerable with supportive relationships that facilitate coping.

Proximity: The desire to be near the people we are attached to.

Toxic Stress

Recognized as the largest public health issue of our generation.

Helping Children Feel Safe & Secure

Bowlby’s Attachment Theory Key Concepts
- Proximity
- Secure Base/Safe Haven
- Separation Distress/
  Separation Anxiety

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Secure Base

In the presence of a sensitive and responsive adult, an infant or toddler will use the adult as a “secure base” or base of security from which to explore. The child returns to the “secure base” for comfort and safety. This confidence is forged during early childhood.

- John Bowlby

What Can Parents do to be a secure base?

- Stay in sight while child explores.
  I can see you want to explore the new playground. I’m right here, if you need me.
- Stay close by.
  This is a new place; I will hold you for awhile longer.
- Reassure child’s fears to create a Safe Haven.
  I’m here. The dog won’t hurt you.
- Do what you say you will.
  I will be done in 3 minutes. Let’s set the timer. I will be here when you wake up for nap.

Separation Distress & Stranger Anxiety

Anxiety that occurs in the absence of the attachment figure.

Predictable Schedule & Routines

Routines create sense of predictability and security.

- Post chart of daily routines (snack, naptime, meals, bedtime).
  Remember? After nap is snack time, and then we will go outside.

When Are High Stress Times?

Separations
Diapering & Toileting
Bedtime
Mealtime

Naming Scary Things

Naming scary things helps kids feel more safe.

Office referrals went down 75% using Ms. Kendra’s approach.
The FSU College of Medicine’s Center for 
Child Stress and Health educates 
children about COVID-19 and gives 
children tips on how to cope with 
changes brought on by the outbreak by 
Javier I. Rosado, the center’s clinical 
director.

Download for free 
at fsustress.org/ebook.html.

Includes black-and-white drawings that 
kids can color and activities that invite 
them to share how they’re feeling and to 
think about how they can have fun even 
while they must stay home.

1. Safe Harbor Summary

• Understand the concept of “secure base.”
• Stay close by
• Maintain predictable schedule and routines.
• Reduce contact with unfamiliar people
• Make it easier by preparing for high stress 
times
• Name scary things.

2. Attunement

• Learn to accurately and empathically understand and 
respond to children’s actions, communications, 
needs and feelings.

I can see you need a little more time to say goodbye. 
I will stay a few more minutes.
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Signs of Attunement:
- Focused & engaged
- Unhurried
- Followed child’s lead
- Responsive to baby’s cues
- Respectful
- Smiles
- Eye contact
- Physical touch & reassurance

“…their time together was perceptively nourished by their relationship.”

Figuring Out What Child Needs

Then figuring out how to calm a crying baby?

Figuring Out What Child Needs: Circle of Security
Parent Attending to the Child’s Needs

What Do These Children Need?
Helping Children Cope with Stress & Trauma

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What Does This Child Need?

Help Me Get My Emotions Under Control!

Help Organize their Feelings.

You are angry that your friend took your toy, what should we do next?
You are crying and rubbing your eyes, I think you are feeling tired.

Connect Emotionally

Support Enjoyment of Daily Care Routines

Learn Child’s Interests and Skills

You’ve worked all these puzzles. Would you like to try a new one?
**Match Activities to the Child’s Interests and Skills**

I know you love dinosaurs. We’ve got a new book you might like.

**Attachment Builds through Serve & Return Interactions**

https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/

**Realistic Expectations About Parenting**

**Encourage Circles of Support for Parents**

**Decrease Stress, Feel Better**

Eat more of this, go for a walk, take a nap, or call a friend to decrease stress and you’ll feel better.

**2. Attunement Summary**

- Observe and learn child’s cues.
- Stay attuned to accurately understand & respond to children’s actions, communications, needs and feelings.
- Learn child’s likes and dislikes.
- Match activities to skills and interest.
- Respond quickly and appropriately.
- Stay close by.
- Be physically and emotionally available.
- Remain focused and engaged.
3. Self-Regulation & Calming Strategies

What is Early Childhood Mental Health?

- Growing competencies to grow well and to love well
- Experience, express and regulate emotions and recover from dysregulation
- Establish trusting relationship and repair conflict
- Explore and learn and tolerate frustration

Dr. Alicia Leiberman

Growing competencies to grow well and to love well

Experience, express and regulate emotions and recover from dysregulation

Dr. Alicia Leiberman

Explore and learn and tolerate frustration

Self Regulation Skills
Developed in Context of Secure Early Relationships

Dr. Mimi A. Graham, Florida State University
Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy
Caregivers Can Support Emotional Regulation

Infants and toddlers depend on adults to help them experience, regulate and express emotions.

Adults help children learn to regulate their emotions. They may:
- provide comfort to help alleviate negative emotions and reinforce positive ones;
- change the environment to provide a change of pace when needed;
- help the child label and validate their feelings, for instance, "I know that you are scared, it's OK to be scared and I am right here for you;" and
- model coping skills during emotional experiences.

Parallel Process of Holding

We can learn to hold ourselves.

So, we can hold the parent.

So the parent can hold/contain herself/himself.

And then hold the baby.

Finally, the baby can internalize the holding and balance self and interactive regulation.

Nurturing Relationships Can Buffer Stress & Help Coping

Tolerable stress is a physiological state that could potentially disrupt brain development but is buffered by supportive relationships that facilitate coping.

Use Consistent Calming Language

“Calm down. Stop. Breathe. Count. You will be fine.”

I can see you have some ‘big feelings’ today. Let’s go to the ‘calm-down box.’ Would you like some ‘calm-down’ toys?

Talk About Feelings & What to Do

I can see you have some ‘big feelings’ today. Let’s go to the ‘calm-down box.’ Would you like some ‘calm-down’ toys?

You are angry that your friend took your toy. What should we do next?

Encourage Comfort Items

Do you want to bring your blanket today?
Redirect to a Quiet Spot

Looks like you could use some quiet time to calm down and organize your feelings.

Meditation Increases Self Regulation

Calming techniques, de-escalation and mindfulness strategies can help calm heightened arousal & increase self regulation.

Encourage Self Expression

Encourage art, pretend play, and music as outlets for expressing fears and emotions.

Can you paint a picture of it?
Let’s think of a song about what happened.

Singing…

Reduces stress, elevates “feel good” endorphins in the brain, improves mood

Play Games for Self-Regulation

Hokey Pokey
Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes
Mother, May I?
Simon Says

Books Show How to Deal with Conflict, Cope & Teaching Executive Functioning

Different characters teach positive social and emotional values:
• how to cope with sadness
• how to use words instead of actions to deal with anger
• how to be a good friend
• how to express gratitude
• how to delay gratification.

These books help young children learn to deal with stress and interpersonal conflicts and develop executive functioning.
A little squirrel announces that he was once very, very scared and finds out that he is not alone. Lots of little animals went through scary experiences, but they react in different ways. Turtle hides and gets a tummy ache, monkey clings, dog barks, and elephant doesn’t like to talk about it. They need help, and they get help from grown-ups who help them feel safe and learn ways to cope with difficult feelings.

FREE download at: https://piploproductions.com/stories/once

Order directly through Amazon $14.95

Wholesale rate $8 a book plus handling from Chandra.Ghosh@ucsf.edu

View as video with Chandra reading the book: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXOgvchh_Lc

Sesame Street in Communities offers free resources to those working with kids and families. Available in quantities of 50. Send an email to communities@sesame.org

3. Self-Regulation & Calming Strategies Summary
- Use consistent language to calm down.
- Learn to tolerate frustration.
- Encourage comfort items.
- Talk about feelings & what to do.
- Play games to learn self-regulation.
- Learn mindfulness & meditation.
- Encourage art, play, books and music as outlets for expressing fears and other emotions.

4. Positive Guidance & Support
**Signs of Stress & Trauma**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Babies</th>
<th>Toddlers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From clingy to flat affect with no joy</td>
<td>Biting, kicking, tantrums, unprovoked aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged uncontrollable crying</td>
<td>Disinterested in toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t explore</td>
<td>Indiscriminate preferences of caregivers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preferred caregiver</td>
<td>No appetite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to thrive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat affect</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preschool**

- Repetitive play about violent event
- Sleep troubles or nightmares
- Hyper vigilance
- Skill regression

**Babies Toddlers**

- From clingy to flat affect with no joy
- Prolonged uncontrollable crying
- Doesn’t explore
- No preferred caregiver
- No appetite

**Reframing “Bad Kids”**

Shifts from the question: “What is wrong with you?” to: “What happened to you?”

From a trauma lens, we look beneath the anger, sadness, or challenging behaviors to see the child’s unmet emotional needs. “I wonder what happened that he would respond like that?”

**Understand Children’s Underlying Emotional Needs in Challenging Behaviors**

All behavior has meaning. What is the child communicating? Put words to children’s cues.

I see you turning your head away. You don’t feel like playing now? I hear your angry voice, tell me more.

**Learn to read emotional cues**

Observe the Child’s Behavior

To figure out a child’s emotional needs, observe the behavior. Then, ask yourself, “Does the child need to be reassured, to feel safe, to be delighted in, or to help organize his feelings?”

**Observe the Child’s Behavior**

Use a Trauma Lens

“I wonder what happened that she would respond like that?”

- Support child’s unique needs.
  * I can see that it’s hard for you to sit still today. Would you like to stand beside me?
- Provide safe and loving limits.
  * No biting. It hurts. It’s not safe to run. Hold my hand.
- Model trust, emotional regulation and empathy.
  * I’m really frustrated. I’m going to take a minute to calm down. I wonder how she feels when you say that?
- Knowing when and who to call for help.
**Encourage Emotional Connections**

- Ask about family’s methods of discipline.
- Discourage physical punishment.
- Encourage emotional connection.
- Providing positive attention can promote appropriate toddler behavior.

**Positive Discipline & Guidance**

- **Seeking Connection**
  
  Children are more likely to behave well when they feel safe & secure in their emotional connection.

- **Offer Time In Rather than Time Out**
  
  Child needs a sense of safety instead of isolation.
  
  Seems like you need a hug today. Would you like to come sit on my lap?

- **Label Emotions With Words**
  
  I see you are sad today. Do you want to put words to your tears?

- **Being With**
  
  - *Being with* is to be present and emotionally available which helps children move through difficult emotions.
  - *Being without* often prolongs the distress.
  
  Adult: I am here and you are worth it.
  Child: You are here and I must be worth it.
Mutual Delight

Helping Children Blossum

Help your toddler feel important

Recognize Early Red Flags

Early Identification of Autism Spectrum: 16 Gestures by 16 Months

Understand the Urgency of Intervening Early

If you provide the same experiences for the same period, you won’t have the same impact at age 10 than if age 2.
4. Positive Guidance & Support Summary

- Learn to read children’s cues. Put words to cues.
- Observe child’s play. Look for repetitive play or drawing about traumatic event.
- Observe behavior to figure out child’s emotional needs. Label emotions with words. Look for the unmet emotional needs.
- Acknowledge efforts.
- Use time in, rather than time out.
- Fill up their cup.
- Delight in.
- Being with.
- Use a trauma lens.

Helping Children Deal With Stress & Trauma

1. Safe Harbor
2. Attunement
3. Self-Regulation & Calming Strategies
4. Positive Guidance & Support

When You Need More Help

Know when and who to call for additional support.

Dandelions & Orchids

Hardiness of a Dandelion

Orchids Flourish Under the Right Conditions
Multigenerational Approaches to Treatment

Most promising programs for preventing and treating mental health problems in young children:

—Provide therapeutic intervention to address the child’s needs, and
—Simultaneously, address the foremost needs of the caregivers.

Access to Professional Supports

1. Mental Health Consultant
2. Family Doctor
3. Behavioral Health Supports via 211

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Trauma Informed Tool Kit

National Child Traumatic Stress Network at www.nctsn.org/

Partners Handouts to Help Children Cope with Stress & Trauma

Stay Connected!

FSU Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy
www.cpeip.fsu.edu

Partners Facebook Home Visitor Support Group
www.facebook.com/PartnersFSU

Partners Instagram
@fsupartners

Partners Twitter
@FSU_CPEIP

The End

Mimi A. Graham, Ed.D., Director
mgraham@fsu.edu