

Trauma-Informed Childcare

Volunteer Training



What is Trauma

A trauma is anything that a person perceives as threatening to her personal safety. For adults, this can include accidents, injuries, significant or sudden losses, crimes, and disasters. For children, this can also include abuse, neglect, and separation or perceived betrayal from caregivers.

What is a Trigger?

- A trigger is a reminder of a traumatic event that leads a child to experience the same emotions and behaviors as she did during the original trauma*
- Even though the trigger is often benign, the child feels as if he is in life-threatening danger*

Common triggers for trauma-exposed children

- Transitions:** moving from one activity/ location to another
- Loss of control/ feeling powerless:** being told to do something or that something is happening and not having a choice or say in the matter
- Sensory overload:** too much noise, commotion, or people—See “Tips on Setting up Environment” for some ways to help avoid sensory overload

How to respond to triggers

- When a child is triggered, they will respond with one of the following responses:

- Fight**—can look like a tantrum, verbal aggression, or violence
- Flight**—physically fleeing, or emotionally/cognitively avoiding something
- Freeze**—can be physically or emotionally freezing, or a total system shut down

- We need to see a child’s behavior as based in anxiety vs. seeing them as just willfully disobedient.**

When you recognize that a child is triggered, it is important to remember they are reacting emotionally and not reasoning cognitively. It is impossible to reason with a person who is triggered, because that part of their brain is frozen until the emotional reaction passes.

- Focus on **de-escalating** the child’s emotional reaction **before** trying to reason or apply a consequence.

De-escalating techniques include:

- Taking a child to a quiet place away from commotion or triggers
- Reassuring the child they are safe
- Repeating back what the child is saying or feeling so they know you understand and care about them
- Offering a drink of water
- Offering a calming activity (coloring, a simple puzzle, stringing beads), etc...

How to avoid Triggers

Avoiding Transition Triggers:

1. If there is a schedule, communicate it to kids ahead of time
"We will have free time until 6:30, then we will clean up, have a snack at 6:45, start a movie at 7:00, and go home at 8:30."
2. Give warnings leading up to transitions
"In 15 minutes we are going to start cleaning up.... In 10 minutes we will clean up...Just 5 more minutes to play before we clean up...Ok, time to clean up!"
3. Post picture schedules/ posters of the schedule, so they can see transitions before they come
4. Have a 1on 1 volunteer stay with a child who seems challenged by transitions, to distract them with conversation and guide them in the transition.

Avoiding Control Triggers:

1. Give directions in the form of choices
"You can choose to clean up the Legos or the cars."
2. Communicate rules clearly
"Be safe, be kind, be respectful"
3. Reward good behavior
 - Verbal Praise – Praise as much as you can for anything that you can! (Bonus: *this is our chance to speak the gospel into these kids' lives. Trauma tells them negative things, but if we can remain positive in our words and tone with them, we get the chance to tell them who they are in Christ!*)
 - High fives
 - Adding privileges- (i.e. "because you did this so well, you get the first turn at our next game")
 - Sticker chart & prize at end of event
4. Start with humor before entering into a power struggle whenever possible. Humor is a great distraction and diffuser of control-struggles.
5. Pick your battles. Kids exposed to trauma are hard-wired to survive and might see even a small issue as a matter of survival and "dig in their heels." So, use redirection, distraction or humor instead, whenever possible.
5. Avoid authoritarian attitudes (the idea that as an authority you automatically deserve respect, trust, and obedience; although kids without trauma will not have a problem treating you this way, kids with trauma have often been betrayed or hurt by authority figures and so have learned that blindly trusting authority is dangerous)
6. Lower your age-appropriate expectations. Some children exposed to drugs/ alcohol in utero can function similarly to a child half their age! So an 8 year old, could potentially be closer to a 4 year old in what you can expect behaviorally.

BE CALM!

When triggered, the amygdala part of the child's brain can become "hijacked." They need your calm attitude in order to regulate theirs. So, if a child is getting anxious or frustrated, the most important thing you can do to keep the child from dysregulating is to stay calm yourself!

Safety Best practices

1. Consult your church children's ministry leader to find out the following childcare policies
 - Restroom trips and diaper changing
 - Ratio of volunteers to children (and then we'd recommend increasing it to 1:3 or even 1:2 for this population of kids.
 - Security within the building
 - Teen helpers
 - Filing an incident report
1. If child is hurting others... remove immediately to another space.
2. Regarding: "Runners"- (a child physically runs away whenever triggered). Assign a volunteer to be their "buddy" , who's role is to keep an eye on them the entire time. They should be mindful of all exits and make sure they stay between the child and the exit.

Tips on Setting Up the Environment/ Event

1. When children register for the event, please be sure to ask about any behaviors volunteers should be aware of (i.e. tendency to run, aversion to sensory input, etc...)
2. Divide up your time/ space into stations and don't expect children to sit as long as your Sunday school attendees might.
3. Have visual representations (i.e. posters, drawings, pictures) of the schedule, rules, and consequences; this helps communication be clear which helps kids feel safe.
4. Have a limited number of activities available and clearly set out; this allows kids to have a choice but not be overwhelmed by too many choices.
5. Conduct an audit of your childcare space for safety and security for children who are unfamiliar with the boundaries of your space and could have a tendency to run. (i.e. on Sunday mornings you might keep the classroom door open because your students know not to leave the classroom. But for this event a physical boundary might be necessary to keep children contained in the classroom.)
6. Break up large spaces with tables, dividers, or activities; ask, "Is this space big enough for kids to run or be too rambunctious?" If the answer is yes, then they probably will do it.
7. If rotating between various areas of the church for activities, please remember that this is introducing a time of transition and an opportunity for runners to escape. Please staff accordingly.
8. Try to limit the noise and commotion in your space. Make sure the space is large enough for the number of people in it, possibly avoid playing music in the background of an already noisy room. If room allows, consider a "Quiet Room/ Space" for children who are over-stimulated.
9. Whenever possible, help a child who has become sensory overloaded to calm by using big muscle groups (especially prior to expecting them to sit nicely). Including: pushing or carrying heavy objects, obstacle courses, etc...You can even ask them to help you carry supplies, or move furniture and not only will their big muscle needs be satisfied, they'll feel special being singled out.

Thank you so much for your willingness to provide childcare for children involved in the foster care system! If you have any questions, please email me (maneill@ugm.org)

-Mandy Neill

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