

# Applying It: Responding to the Effects of Trauma on Young Children

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*This tip sheet covers strategies for helping caregivers prevent and manage challenging behaviors in children who have experienced trauma while also taking care of their own mental health.*

## RECALL IT

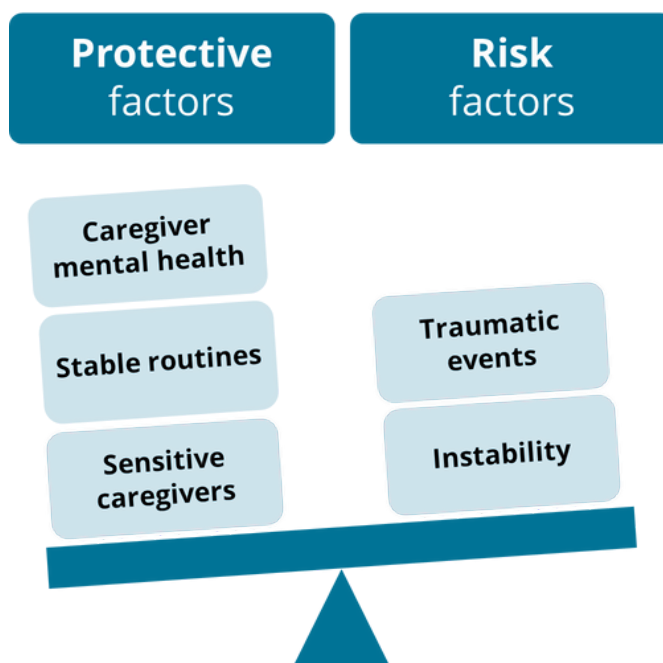
The *Introducing It* tip sheet presents these ideas:

- Early life **trauma** has lasting effects on the way that children learn and grow
- Infants and young children are particularly vulnerable to trauma because they are dependent on their caregivers
- Trauma affects children's development of brain and body systems, like their physiological stress response system
- Trauma can appear in young children's behaviors, like aggression, difficulty paying attention, sleep problems, periods of mentally separating from reality, and fussiness

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

Although adults cannot always prevent children from experiencing trauma, they can play an important role in helping children recover from past stressful or traumatic experiences. Just like children can experience stress or trauma in lots of different areas of their life, they also benefit from **protective factors** in all aspects of their world.

When children have adequate resources (like food, shelter, and clothing), stable routines, and healthy and sensitive caregivers at home, at school, and in the community, they have the best chance of recovering from a stressful event.



Every important adult in a child's life has the opportunity to help promote feelings of safety by providing children with what they need. What's more, when children feel safe and secure in their environment, they are more prepared to start to learn to regulate their emotions and behaviors on their own.

## "PUT YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK ON FIRST"

Anyone who takes care of children—whether as a parent or a professional—knows that the work is rewarding as well as exhausting. Working with children who have experienced trauma can be particularly overwhelming because they may require more one-on-one time while also engaging in challenging behaviors more often.

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When on an airplane, adults are always reminded they need to put their own oxygen mask on first before trying to help others around them. Why? Because if we aren't taking care of our own health, it's less likely that we will be able to take care of others. The same thing is true when it comes to working with children at home, at school, or in the community: we have to "put our own oxygen mask on first" and take care of ourselves in order to take care of young ones. Recognizing our own emotions, triggers, and needs as well as taking care of ourselves actually allows us to be better caregivers of infants and children.

Everyone has certain behaviors that "trigger" them or make them feel overwhelmed.

- What are the child behaviors that test your patience the most or are the hardest for you to deal with?
- What are strategies you already know about to help yourself stay calm in the moment?
- What self-care do you practice before or after interacting with children?

*Reflecting on our triggers will make it easier to recognize when our emotions are getting the better of us in the moment. It's also important to recognize the tools we already have to stay calm and take care of ourselves. Being prepared for challenging moments with young children is part of taking care of ourselves and allows us to take better care of children.*

## **PREDICTABILITY HELPS YOUNG CHILDREN FEEL SAFE**

Young children who have experienced trauma may be on the lookout for danger or anything new in their environment. This is our brain's natural reaction to trauma in an attempt to protect us from future threats.

Because young children who have experienced trauma are more sensitive to changes, caregivers can help them feel safe by enhancing predictability through routines and by making transitions as easy and smooth as possible.

### **Step 1: Implement a consistent routine into children's schedules**

Even though specific activities might change, children feel safe and behave better when they know generally what is coming next. Consider breaking the day up into predictable chunks, like breakfast, crafts, outside time, lunch, and nap. Children benefit from visual schedules made up of pictures to help them know what is coming next.

**What routines are already in place?  
What parts of your day are the most  
unpredictable or chaotic?  
How could a routine be added in?**

### **Step 2: Anticipate challenges**

**When are the times in your day when  
children struggle the most?**

Many children have a hard time with busy environments or transitions that include:

- Moving between settings (for example, inside to outside time)
- Moving away from a preferred activity
- Trying something new
- Engaging in an activity that might be an unintentional trauma reminder
- Going to or from a busy or less structured environment, like a cafeteria or playground

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## Step 3: Make transitions easier

There are steps caregivers can take to make needed transitions from one activity to the next as smooth as possible:

- Provide multiple warnings that a transition is coming.
- Give clear and simple instructions when it is time to transition, focusing on what you want the children to do (rather than what they shouldn't do).
- Incorporate routines into repeated transitions, like always singing the same clean-up song.
- Use routines to reduce the number of total transitions, like doing several activities at a table in a row rather than moving back and forth from tables to carpet time.

## RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Caregiver-child relationships are protective factors. When children have trusting and warm relationships with important adults, they learn that the world around them is safe and that others can be trusted to meet their needs. This helps children try new things, explore their world, and recover from stressful experiences.

Caregivers take steps to build relationships with children every day! Consider the tips below. If you already regularly engage in a practice, check the box on the left. If you would like to give one a try, check the box on the right.

- |                          |   |                          |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Get to know children by asking about their families and interests | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Let children take the lead in play while you observe and listen   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Give positive attention and praise                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Make time to have one-on-one time with each child during the day  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Encourage children to share photos or favorite toys from home     | <input type="checkbox"/> |

*Every caregiver interacts with children who are more difficult to reach: perhaps because the child is more reserved, or perhaps because he or she engages in behaviors that are "triggering" to a caregiver. Caregivers must first identify the reason a behavior may provoke a reaction within themselves, and mindfully manage their response. With this approach, caregivers can then offer every child the benefit of a meaningful connection with a safe adult. All children deserve this time and attention.*

Consider the following reflections:

**Who is a child you felt particularly connected to?  
What made that possible?**

**Who is a child you struggle to connect with?  
Choose two ideas from the relationship-building checklist you filled out that could help you connect with this child.**

## CO-REGULATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

*"When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos." - L. R. Knost*

We are not born with the ability to regulate ourselves. The very youngest infants need caregivers to soothe them, and even older children and teens rely on support from others to get them through stressful situations. Offering children support and strategies to help them manage their emotions is called co-regulation. Co-regulation is an important experience for young children that builds their ability to regulate themselves as they grow up.

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When children lose control of their emotions and behaviors, part of a caregiver's job is correcting the behavior so that the child can learn appropriate responses to challenging situations. However, most children aren't ready to listen or learn from a consequence in the middle of a tantrum!

Imagine Tommy just accidentally knocked down Sarah's tower, and she responds by hitting him. How could you respond? The **connect, then correct** approach suggests that when an adult helps a child regulate their emotions and behaviors first, the child can learn more once they have calmed down.

## Step 1: Validate the emotions the child may be feeling

"He knocked your tower down. That's really frustrating."

## Step 2: Let the child know you are here if they need you

"Would you like to sit next to me for a few minutes?"

## Step 3: Offer appropriate coping strategies if they are ready to listen

"Would you like a hug or to take three deep breaths together?"

## Step 4: Correct behavior and/or problem solve together once they are calm

"When you get upset, it's not okay to hurt your friends. Even when you are angry, you need to use safe hands," or "I can help you build the tower again, or we can find something new for you to play with."

*Teaching children to regulate their emotions takes years. The brain does not stop developing until our mid-20s! Children can practice coping skills when they are calm so that they are more ready to use them with an adult's help in times of stress. Children can be taught to take deep breaths, engage in sensory stimulation activities, ask to take a break, snuggle a stuffed animal, or ask for a hug when they need help calming down.*

Practice applying the connect, then correct approach to these scenarios.

- 4-year-old Jamil was not ready to leave the park yet. When you asked him to take your hand to come inside, he fell down on the grass and began screaming.

*Consider: How might you need to manage your own emotions in this situation?*

- 14-month-old Mari started crying as soon as her mom dropped her off with you for child care.

*Consider: How might you adapt the connect, then correct approach for a very young child?*

## RED FLAGS: SIGNS THAT A CHILD MIGHT NEED MORE HELP

Although caregivers can make a huge difference in children's lives, sometimes mental health professionals are needed to address concerns with development or behavior. There are no universal "red flags": all children's behaviors should be considered in context with their developmental level, personality, and past behaviors. However, some signs that a child may need more help include:

- Extremely fearful or aggressive behavior
- Repeated sexual behaviors
- Withdrawal or lack of engagement with adults and children
- Sudden changes in sleep, hygiene, behaviors, or emotions
- Withdrawal or lack of engagement with adults and children
- Developmental regression (losing skills the child had mastered)

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## ***If you are a child's primary caregiver and want to seek help:***

Reach out to your child's pediatrician for mental health provider recommendations. Alternatively, visit [Help Me Connect](#) for listings of early childhood mental health providers in Minnesota.

## ***If you are another important adult in a child's life:***

Consider sharing your observations with the child's parent or guardian. Express that you have noticed changes in their behavior and that you are concerned. Focus on what you have observed using "I noticed..." statements, rather than placing blame or making assumptions about the meaning of behaviors. Ask if similar behaviors are occurring at home and whether the family would be interested in being connected with support services.

If you are concerned about abuse or neglect, report your concerns to your supervisor or county child protection services. If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

## **DIVING INTO IT**

### **For additional information on this topic,**

Please visit our website: [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)

Visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [nctsn.org](https://nctsn.org)

Download our tip sheets on stress behaviors in young children: [z.umn.edu/stressbehaviors](https://z.umn.edu/stressbehaviors)

Check out these related online self-study modules:

Holding the Baby in Mind When We are Dysregulated Ourselves ([z.umn.edu/holdingthebabyinmind](https://z.umn.edu/holdingthebabyinmind))

Tackling the Elephants in the Room Part 1 ([z.umn.edu/elephants1](https://z.umn.edu/elephants1)) and Part 2 ([z.umn.edu/elephants2](https://z.umn.edu/elephants2))

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## **DEFINING IT**

### **Trauma**

The emotional, psychological, and physiological residue left over from heightened levels of toxic stress

### **Protective factors**

Parts of a child's world that help them regulate their emotions, prevent trauma, and recover from toxic stress or trauma

### **Co-Regulation**

Offering warm and responsive interaction to another in order to promote understanding, expression and regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors