

Trauma-Informed Care Series

This month, we bring you part four of an eight-part series about the effects of trauma on children and parenting through a trauma-informed lens. This information is courtesy of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. More information can be found at www.nctsn.org.

Module 4 – Building a Safe Space

by Heather Brockway, MSW, LSW

What is SAFETY? “The condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury or loss.”

Physical Safety vs. Psychological Safety

- **Physical safety** – Some children need reassurance that their new environment is safe. They need to know that you have locks on your doors/windows, an alarm system, that your electricity bill is paid, or that you have food in the house. When this happens, they experience physical safety.
- **Psychological safety** – Some children need reassurance that the people around them are safe. When adults have consistently harmed them, they may believe that all adults are going to harm them in some way. When they feel you are safe, they feel psychologically safe.

Promoting Safety

There are several ways you can help traumatized children feel psychologically safe:

- Help them become familiar with your home and neighborhood
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Take them to walk your dog, introduce them to your favorite and safest neighbor, give them a tour of your home, introduce them to the other children in the neighborhood
- Give them choices and responsibilities so they can have some control over their day-to-day lives (these choices can be small things for us as adults)
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Let them choose between two food choices, pick which clothes to wear, choose to shower or take a bath, have a snack and THEN do homework, etc.
- Set limits so they don't feel overwhelmed or responsible for more than they can handle
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Post house rules, put up a white board with the house schedule – try to collaborate with them on these and ask for their input on these things
- Give them some idea of what is going to happen in their future.
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Make sure you are sharing enough to keep them in the loop, but make sure it is age-appropriate and you are not sharing stressful information that the child is not old enough to handle (have the child's therapist help deliver sensitive information)
- See and appreciate each child as a unique and special person
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Allow them to pick some of their own clothing and room décor, highlight their positive qualities, allow them to express themselves freely without judgment
- Help them maintain their sense of connection and continuity with their culture and past
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Have them help you cook their favorite family meal, encourage conversation about their family and culture, take an interest in learning about their history and traditions

Be an Emotional Container

Be willing and prepared to tolerate strong emotional reactions.

- Children who have been through trauma do not always possess the skills to understand, express, and manage their emotions.
THINGS YOU CAN DO: Help your child identify and express their sometimes frightening feelings without hurting others

continued next page

Building a Safe Space, *continued*

- Some children unconsciously try to confirm their negative beliefs about adults being unsafe, so they push caregivers away and wait for you react poorly to them.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: Respond calmly but firmly to emotional outbursts, reassure them their behavior does not change your love for them or determine their placement with you.

Manage Emotional Hot Spots

Some situations may trigger children more than others

- Mealtimes/food – Some children didn't get enough to eat and associate negative feelings with food or exhibit hoarding behavior. Arguments might have happened frequently at dinner or good memories may make them think of their family more at that time.
- Sleep and Bedtime – Many children endured abuse during these times so it can be very traumatizing going to bed. Acknowledge their fears, reassure them they are safe, provide comfort items like nightlights or a stuffed animal.
- Physical Boundaries and Personal Grooming – Some children never learned that their bodies should be valued and protected. They often have no sense of ownership, comfort, or pride in their bodies.

Trauma Reminders

- When a trauma has occurred, sights, smells, sounds, things, places, people, words, colors, or even the child's own feelings can become linked with the trauma.
- Sometimes children don't even know what has triggered them and we might never know why a child had the chaotic moment after it happens.

Real-Life Experience: “Chase’s” Story

Foster parent “Jane” asked her foster child “Chase” to do the dishes. Without warning, Chase got very agitated and escalated quickly. He was screaming at the top of his lungs. When Jane tried to calm him down, he only got angrier. Chase then lifted one of the dishes in the air as if he was going to throw it.

Jane decided to sit down cross-legged on the kitchen floor about four feet away from him. She was quiet and calm and didn't say a word. After about 10 minutes, Chase calmed down and sat down on the floor cross-legged right across from Jane.

After the incident, Jane gave Chase another hour to regulate his emotions. She came to him and told him that regardless of what had just happened, she still really cared about him and did not want him to go anywhere. Jane told Chase if he ever needed to talk about anything, she was always ready and willing.

Chase couldn't articulate why he got so upset; he wasn't able to identify details and didn't want to talk much about it, although he did apologize.

Jane was the perfect **emotional container** for Chase's outburst and remained calm and composed. She did not demand answers for why he was acting out or make him figure out his trigger.

Although it is difficult to not identify a child's triggers, there may have been multiple things that could have prompted this incident. It is possible that his biological parent yelled and screamed at him to do his chores frequently. It might have been that dishes were thrown in an argument between his parents. It might have been an unrelated sight, sound, or smell.

Regardless of what the trigger was, it is the role of a trauma-informed parent to see beyond the behavior and know that there are big underlying feelings underneath the surface of **EVERY** undesirable behavior.