

Strategies for Helping Youth With Trauma Exposure

by Megan K. Lerner, LCSW and Anthony T. Vesco, PhD

Three major behaviors exhibited by children who have experienced trauma are emotional dysregulation, withdrawal, and aggression. These behaviors can be difficult for providers to handle. Here are some strategies to support the children in your care who may have experienced trauma.

Emotional Dysregulation

- Assist them in identifying their emotions
 - Using feelings charts/emojis, asking them to rate their intensity
 - Use words to describe how you (the adult) are feeling and use that to model expected behaviors for the child
- Allow them to express their own thoughts
 - "What is your brain saying to you?"
 - Incorporate superheroes or cartoon characters to assist with talking back to thoughts and/or feelings
- Have a designated coping space
 - Fidgets, bean bag chairs, pillows/stuffies, lowered lights, minimal noises, tents
- Provide clear and concise directions
 - "We need to sit down."
 - "Let's take some deep breaths."
- Consider the basic need of the child to help improve their mood
 - Do they need a snack, nap or water?

Withdrawal

- Allow them to take space for a while and see if they naturally engage with time
- Identifying specific, labeled positives in the child, even then the child is expressing feelings of guilt, anger or sadness
 - Validate the feelings by saying things like, "I bet that is really scary!" or "That would make me mad too."
- Encourage them to engage in a positive activity that increases energy and is the opposite of their urge to isolate/shut down
 - Examples include having a dance party, making them a special helper, let them choose an activity for the whole group to engage in
- Give them choices to take breaks or to do independent activities while also encouraging them to join the group (don't give up!)
 - Remind the child that when they are ready to participate everyone will be excited to join them
- Assist them with joining in a task with a partner/small group
 - Scaffold interaction until you can fade yourself out



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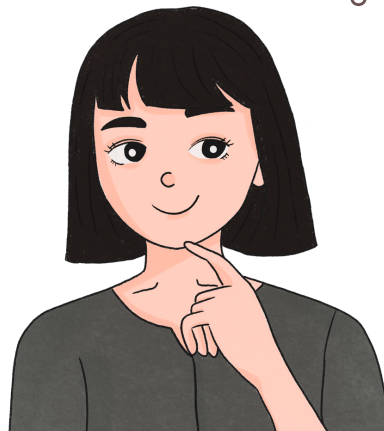
Aggressive Behaviors

- As long as they have safe hands and feet, let the child know you will be ignoring the outburst and then immediately provide praise for calm body behaviors when you see them
- Keep language focused on their behavioral choices and not focused on the child's personality or characteristics
 - Try saying, "I see your hands are having a hard time being safe." And not: "You are usually such a safe person, what is happening here?"
- Consider the purpose of the child's behavior
 - Are they trying to escape a situation
 - To get a tangible need met
 - To gain attention of an adult or test the attachment of the adult
 - To self-stimulate (due to an under-stimulated or "numb" nervous system)
 - Understanding the purpose of the behavior can assist you in meeting the child's needs and provides context for negotiating your next step

Can I shift my perspective from one of managing behaviors to supporting and growing a child's executive functioning?

Can I view problematic behaviors as a child not having mastery over certain executive functioning skills?

Am I optimizing children's sense of autonomy and providing an opportunity to learn and problem-solve?



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