

Supporting Children’s Development of Self-Concept After Trauma Exposure

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

For all children’s healthy self-concept development, we want to support their senses of mastery and social connection. Mastery refers to the ability to achieve goals and engage in appropriate social norms or expectations. A sense of mastery builds a young child’s sense of control, efficacy in engaging with others well, and their confidence. Promoting social connections allows them to perceive greater emotional support and engage in normative social interactions which can help them better understand their environments. In order to mitigate some of the impact of trauma exposure on the development of these skills, here are some ways to promote healthy egos and self-concepts for all children that can be incorporated in your daily routines.

Providing Feedback

- Provide children with labeled, specific praise as it relates to repeatable behaviors
 - “Good job picking up toys right away”
 - “Way to ask your friend if they are okay” [when peer is crying]
- Consider the amount of positive and negative remarks you are making towards a child
 - 5-10 positive remarks for every 1 negative remark
 - Similar to praise, focus on behaviors if a critical message is delivered
 - “Please stop kicking that chair.”
 - “Please remember we keep our hands to ourselves.”



Supporting Children in Play

- Showing interest in what the child is doing
 - Imitate the play that you see
 - If the child is cooking, you start making something too, or pretending to eat
- Describe how they are playing as it is happening
 - “Oh I love the way you are using those blocks to build a tower.”
- Connect play to typical prosocial scripts/situations
 - “I see you’re giving your baby a bottle, are they hungry?”

Providing Affection

- Fist bumps, back pats, hugs (all with permission)
- Expressing words of appreciation and care

Assisting in Meeting Goals

- Set a goal for the day with all children and scaffold support
 - “Today we are going to work on cleaning up one activity before moving to the next. Does anyone have any ideas of what we can tell ourselves to remember this goal?”

If a child has a known or new trauma exposure while in your care, you may also want to incorporate these ideas with the goal to bolster the child's sense of environmental control and promote autonomy.



Maintain Routines

- Following a trauma exposure, it is best to return to the routines and structure that were in place prior to the trauma exposure
- Helps Increase predictability and a sense of mastery in their family child care setting



Give Choices, Even When They're Forced Choices

- For example, "You can clean up the blocks or art first, which would you like?"



Provide a Safe Place for the Child to Talk

- This may not always be appropriate in the moment, but you can support children if they want to share in a safe space
- Allows the child some control over their own experience
- Allows them to build a trusting relationship with an identified adult

Increase the Level of Support and Encouragement

- Help children know who they can go to if they need additional supports
- Allow the child to identify a safe adult in their day and build on social connections
- Clarify times of day that the child can visit their special support
- Provide redirection with a clear plan for discussion if the setting is not appropriate
- Set clear, firm limits for inappropriate behavior and develop logical consequences

RECOGNIZE THAT BEHAVIORS MAY BE RELATED TO TRAUMA

- One hard day does not mean all days will be the same. This can help eliminate the idea that the child's behavior is all bad or good, and foster a more dynamic sense of identity.
- Symptoms can come and go in waves and may depend on certain triggers, such as anniversaries of exposures or holidays
- Children reenact their experiences, see Play Reenactment handout from last session



Be Sensitive to Triggers

- Consider the child's five senses and minimize overstimulation
- Consider information you have regarding their experience and whether there are ways to modify the environment
- Decreasing unpredictability increasing children's sense of mastery over their environment



Be Aware of Other Children's Reactions to the Child with Trauma History

- If the child is returning to care following a known exposure and absence, create a script that the child and provider can use if peers have questions about any changes and their absence
 - Keep messaging simple
 - Use the child's own words to describe their absence
 - Confirm messaging with parent/legal guardian
- This allows the child to have prosocial interactions with peers while helping them maintain both privacy and control over their story.

References