



# A Clinician's Tip Sheet for Working with Child Trauma Survivors

## *Supporting you in moving from trauma awareness to trauma responsiveness*

Working with young trauma survivors can be both challenging and fulfilling for you and the people that you work with. This guide highlights areas that can deepen your therapeutic relationship as you support youth and their families in their journey to healing, wellness and building resilience.

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**What Is Trauma?** Trauma happens when we feel incredibly overwhelmed due to circumstances or an event(s). It is when something happens that is too fast or too much to deal with - and there is not enough time to integrate or process the experience. Trauma may cause us to look at the world around us and ourselves differently too. For children, it's can be severe because it may impact their brain development.

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### CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TRAUMA: CREATING A HOLDING SPACE

#### **How Do I Talk About Trauma With Kids?**

Let children and youth know that talking about what they witnessed or experienced can help. Provide opportunities for them to share but remember that they should never be forced or pushed to talk about their trauma.

Some tips:

- *Provide ongoing opportunities for children to talk.* It may require several conversations. And, they may have more questions as time goes on.
- *Answer questions at a level the child can understand.* Share that you may not have all of the answers to their questions if helpful.
- *Give children permission to discuss fears and*

*concerns* about the trauma or other issues.

- *Reassure children* there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of feelings and reactions is okay.
- *Encourage children to express their feelings to adults* (including therapists, teachers, and parents) who can help them understand them.
- *Be mindful* not to focus on blame to avoid internalized or externalized shaming.
- *Building resilience in traumatized children is critical.* Ask them how they have successfully managed challenging situations and highlight their strengths.
- *Encourage children of all ages to express emotions* if they feel comfortable through talking, writing, or art.

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### PSYCHOEDUCATION: TRAUMA RESPONSES VARY

#### **How Are Youth Impacted?**

Children and youth respond to trauma in a variety of ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may do fine for weeks or months, and then begin to have reactions. Knowing common signs at different ages can help to recognize problems and respond appropriately.

- **Preschool Age** children ages 2-5 can have an especially hard time adjusting. They have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times. Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral (i.e. bedwetting) stage after a violent or traumatic event. Preschoolers may have unusual fears or even have increased separation anxiety. Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are strange aches and pains.

Other symptoms to watch for are speech and behavior changes (increased aggression, hyperactivity, etc.). Preschoolers may also exaggerate or repeat certain stories.

- **Early Childhood** (ages 5–11) may include some of the same reactions that preschool children have and may also regress. They may socially withdraw or fear going to school, or even compete more for the attention of caregivers. Their school performance may drop and they may also have behavior changes.
- **Adolescents** aged 12–14 are likely to reject prior responsibilities or connections. They may have odd physical complaints or they may experiment with high-risk behaviors (i.e., alcohol or drug use). Vying for attention of caregivers or other is also common even in non-direct ways.

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## REGULATION: HELPING YOUTH MANAGE THEIR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS & BEHAVIOR

### Why Help Young People Self-Regulate?

Being exposed to trauma and severe adversity often disrupts our ability to self-soothe and regulate. *Self-regulation* is the ability to manage and understand our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Children under the age of 13 cannot fully self-regulate and require *co-regulation* - a relationship involving a primary caregiver.

Some tips:

- *Learn about N.E.A.R. (Neuroscience, Epigenetics, ACEs and Resilience) Science* which describes the relationship between the nervous system and the brain in response to stressful events. Ask youth how they cope as this will guide discussions around the most suitable type of regulation activity.

- *Regulation is connected to safety!* Regulation strategies can be used to open or close your meetings and at any point when the young person is distressed or overwhelmed. Examples include grounding or mindfulness activities (e.g., breathing) and exploring the five senses or even exploring supports.

- *Suggest caregiver and child co-regulation activities* to promote a feeling of security in the young person. Activities will vary at different ages but some things adults can do to support the child with co-regulation include: showing concern understanding, affection and attention; creating a physically and emotionally safe environment; and modeling self-regulation techniques.

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## FAMILY ATTACHMENT: STRENGTHENING SUPPORTS

### How Can I Support Caregivers?

Support and reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Focusing on the attachment between primary caregiver and child can be most helpful. Children also benefit from verbal and physical support (e.g., calm reactions and hugs).

Some tips:

- *Check-in with caregivers regarding their relationship.* Very young children need a lot of physical contact, such as hugging or cuddling.
- *Help caregivers create opportunities for building*

*resilience.* Supportive and nurturing family relationships can help build and strengthen resilience in children as they deal with adversity.

- *Encourage caregivers to maintain normal routines* while adjusting their expectations about performance in school or at home.

- *Caregivers may share traumatic reactions with the child or have strong emotions* (e.g. guilt) associated with their child's traumatization. Encourage caregivers to acknowledge their own reactions and model healing by taking steps to promote their physical and emotional well-being.

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## SELF-CARE: AN ESSENTIAL SKILL IN TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

Working in the mental health field can be very challenging and even more so when working with children who have been exposed to trauma. Self-care is any act we do *deliberately* to take care of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Some tips:

- *Self-assessment and reflection* is a good starting point to find out your levels of stress and how closely you are living your life according to your

values. See the next page for some assessments you can use.

- *Create a self-care plan* you can easily reference. A maintenance plan includes minor but meaningful changes to promote overall well-being. An emergency plan is needed when you are overly stressed.

- *Work with your supervisors to develop way to reduce stress and burnout in the workplace.*

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#### References:

Age, P. A Guide for Parents and Educators.

Adams, L. G., & Paxton, M. (2008). *Counseling Children and Youth in Times of Crisis: Tips to Achieve Success and Avoid Pitfalls.* Ameran Bar Association.

Borden, L. (2004). *Understanding the Impact of Disasters on the Lives of Children and Youth.*

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## Resources to support trauma responsive practices

Below are some webinars, guides, and organizational links you can use to help you move to trauma responsiveness.

### INFORMATION FOR USE WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- [An Introduction to the ACES Study](#) is a short module that provides quality information you can use to further your knowledge, as well as disseminate and train others in your organization.
- The [Foundations of Trauma Informed Care \(TIC\) Self-Learning Program](#) provides an on-boarding and training tool that contains basic and universal information about TIC that can be used across human service sectors (e.g. health, behavioral health, child welfare, and social services).
- [Improving Emotional and Behavioral Self-Regulation](#) (part of the [Healing-Centered Schools: Integrating Trauma-Informed and Resilience Building Approaches as Students Return to Schools](#) multi-series) highlights the importance of self-regulation and introduces practices to support children.
- The resource [Caregiver's Guide to Children and Trauma](#) provides information to better understand children's experiences, conditions, and treatment.
- The webinar [Becoming a Resiliency-Focused Provider to Support Positive Youth Development](#) offers an opportunity for providers to strengthen their own resiliency-focused skills and to begin to use this perspective in their work with young people.
- Effective trauma screening with the goal of creating a safe space to talk about trauma / toxic stress while simultaneously avoiding re-traumatizing children or their caregivers is the focus of [Screening for Trauma in a Trauma-Informed and Bias Reducing Way in Children's Mental Health Services](#) (webinar).
- The [Trauma Informed Social Worker](#) webinar explores the integration of trauma informed care and social work practice.
- [From ACEs to Assets: Supporting the Growth of Resilience to Improve Education, Health, and Wellness Outcomes](#) (webinar) provides an overview of core aspects of resilience development that fit seamlessly with trauma-responsive practices, social-emotional learning, and positive youth development.
- [The Impact of Trauma on Parenting](#) (webinar) focuses on the impact of ACEs and PTSD on parenting and intervention strategies for positive outcomes.
- The [Social Determinants of Health: Connecting the Dots](#) (learning module) provides a basic understanding of the SDOH and the impact of the environment on our overall well-being.
- [Work Wellness and Resilience](#) (learning module) provides an overview of related topics (e.g., compassion satisfaction and fatigue, burnout) and offers strategies for practitioners to being implementing them in their own lives.

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[National Mental Health Information Center](#)  
1-800-789-2647 (English and Español)  
TDD: 1-866-889-2647  
[www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

[National Association of School Psychologists](#)  
1-301-657-0270  
[www.nasponline.org/NEAT](http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT)

[National Center for Children Exposed to Violence](#)  
1-877-49-NCCEV (496-2238)  
[www.nccev.org/violence/children\\_terrorism.htm](http://www.nccev.org/violence/children_terrorism.htm)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)  
Resource: [About Child Trauma](#)

[Professional Quality of Life \(ProQoL\)](#)  
Self-administered tool to assess work-related stress  
<https://proqol.org/proqol-measure>

Hotlines:

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)  
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)  
[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

[Office for Victims of Crime](#)  
1-800-851-3420

TTY: 1-877-712-9279  
[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html)