



School, Home, Community Strategies: Trauma Related Concerns

This Quick Fact Sheet contains strategies to address potential symptoms of complex trauma and should be used in consultation and collaboration with a child's mental health treatment team or as part of a larger intervention approach. These pages contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of trauma. Strategies should always be individualized and implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances. Additionally, this information should never be used to formulate a diagnosis. Mental health diagnoses should be made only by trained mental health professionals after a thorough evaluation. If you are concerned about the mental health or behaviors of any child, access a mental health professional for assessment or consultation.

General Guidelines for Helping Students Impacted by Complex Trauma

IN ORDER TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF COMPLEX TRAUMA, INTERVENTION STRATEGIES NEED TO BE IMPLEMENTED WITH CONSISTENCY AND REPETITION.

Helping children self-regulate is a primary goal for work with children impacted by complex trauma. A key strategy to support the skills necessary for self-regulation is adult attunement to the child's emotional state.

Attunement is the ability to accurately read and respond to the child's emotions rather than behavior. Adults also need to manage their own feelings and responses to children's behavior and model the affect we want the children to learn. Establishing a safe and supportive environment (home, school and community) is critical. Consistency, predictability, and establishment of routines will help develop this sense of safety.

Also, it is difficult for children who have experienced complex trauma to generalize skills so repeating interventions and strategies is critical to success.

When developing an intervention plan, remember to think about the child's stage of development, not their age. Many children impacted by complex trauma have delayed development in a number of areas.

General Strategies

Research has shown that the earlier you introduce movement into a child's day, the more likely they will be able to self-regulate (manage feelings and behaviors) throughout the day. Begin each day with *predictable, structured, patterned, rhythmic movement* and/or *music activities* (e.g. drumming, rocking, Tai Chi, ball bouncing). Promoting and sustaining predictable, patterned, and repetitive interactions with a child throughout the day is an easily implemented strategy across settings and can benefit all children - those who have experienced complex trauma, those whose trauma history may never be clearly identified and those who are impacted by their traumatized peers.

Strategies for Trauma Related Distress

- Provide simple and honest answers to the children's questions.
- Offer the child safe opportunities to talk about their feelings when appropriate. If a child needs support in school, ensure they have access to a mental health professional who can monitor the student and determine whether school is a safe and appropriate place to talk about their experiences.
- Manage your own affect to avoid being triggered by a child and possibly contributing to their trauma.
- Establish a safe environment that is devoid of bullying, ridicule, etc.
- Provide opportunities for the child to "self time out" so they can regroup when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Be sensitive to cues in the environment (lighting, noise, temperature, smells, etc.) that may be triggers for trauma related anxiety and avoid any unnecessary exposure to these potential triggers.
- Pay attention to non-verbal communication that can be triggering to a child (facial expression, tone of voice, proximity to the child, etc.).

Strategies for Building a Sense of Competency

- Maintain realistic performance standards while staying attuned to the student so that you do not “push” them into a “fight, flight, freeze or flock” response.
- Provide opportunity for *meaningful* participation in their home and school communities.
- Identify and cultivate the child’s strengths, talents, and interests.
- Provide frequent encouragement; point out the child’s accomplishments and successes.

Strategies for Attachment and other Social Difficulties

- Stay attuned to the child’s emotional state (cues may be subtle — monitor non-verbal communication).
- Provide opportunities for parallel play where appropriate (playing or learning along side of another vs. doing it together or cooperatively).
- Facilitate socio-emotional growth/social skill (i.e. helping develop skills of turn-taking, winning/losing, sharing, etc.) - remember that children of *any age* may need to “practice” these skills with an adult before they can be successful with their peers.
- Be patient in fostering a safe and trusting relationship.

Strategies for Impaired Executive Functioning (Cortex)

- Offer accommodations for school work — i.e., written notes, modified projects and deadlines, etc. Provide the child with written copies of class notes and/or assignments. Offer an extra set of books to keep at home.
- Incorporate multiple ways to present information when teaching academics or skills; use pictures, manipulatives, verbal and written instructions.
- Remember, processing language can be hard for these children, so allow extra time to process words and to respond to questions/directions.
- Be predictable and provide consistent routines: post a daily schedule (in home and school) where it can be easily seen and review it frequently; consider using pictures, colors in addition to words, etc. to communicate expectations. If there is a change in the schedule or routine, be sure to allow the child ample time to adjust to the change. Transitions can be particularly hard for these children.

Strategies for Behavior Problems

- Model respectful, non-violent behavior and relationships.
- Provide many genuine choices to increase sense of self-efficacy and self-control.
- Be clear about expected behaviors; teach rules and expected behaviors explicitly. Remember, *repetition* is key. Children who have experienced complex trauma will likely take longer to generalize a skill than their peers.
- Avoid using words when a child is dysregulated. Consider walking, rocking, etc. as an intervention until the student is regulated.
- Develop a system for consequences that is not punitive. Consequences should be logical and designed to teach, not punish. Avoid power struggles.
- If behavior is a consistent problem, consider having a functional behavior assessment conducted to determine triggers and develop a behavior intervention plan.

Strategies for Difficulty with Emotional Perception and Regulation (Limbic System)

- Help the child to modulate their emotions by modeling healthy self-regulation (manage your own affect).
- Help the child to identify their feelings by reflecting the feelings back to them: show them you are listening and validate what you hear them saying — avoid offering solutions.
- Assist the child in learning and practicing relaxation techniques such as breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Allow the child to use manipulatives such as stress balls or worry stones.
- Teach the child appropriate and effective ways to communicate and express feelings (remember, you may need to repeat the lessons many, many times).