

Resource Article

Creating Safety for the Traumatized Child

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As you begin the next unit on courage, it is important to understand the things that might hinder children from having courage and what you can do to help them feel safe and confident.

Vulnerable and at-risk children are hurting. They have experienced significant life events, such as abuse, war, abandonment, and poverty. Their world has not been safe. So how do you create safety for a child who might think that he will never be safe?

Understand Trauma in Children

Children experiencing trauma may feel overwhelmed and helpless. They may have an overactive alarm system that is easily triggered. They move into the “Fight, Flight, or Freeze” mode very quickly. They cannot think clearly. Feeling safe is what calms their trauma response. (Read “The Trauma Response: Fight, Flight, or Freeze.”)

Understand What Triggers a Traumatized Child

Knowing what your children have been through will help you to understand their behaviour. Learn what a young person does well and what she struggles with so you can build on her strengths.

Learn what triggers the child to fight, flee, or freeze. If you know the trigger, you can often plan for, prevent, and respond to these situations with success. (Read “The Trauma Response: Understanding Triggers.”)

Create a Safe Environment

Whenever possible, be consistent. Children feel safe when they know who is caring for them. Also be sure everyone treats the children in the same way. Young people feel safe when they know what to expect from the adults in their lives.

Trauma is triggered by the unknown and unexpected. Consistency creates predictability and feelings of safety. Provide consistent routines. When things need to change, give the children plenty of information to help them deal with the change.

Provide transition warnings when change is coming. For example, if you need to clean up at 10:00 a.m., inform children at 9:55 that it is almost time to clean up. If your Sunday school class will be walking around the building during the lesson, let the children know at the beginning of class. Telling them what to expect gives them a sense of control. Suddenly being asked to stop an activity and move quickly to something else or being asked to do something unexpected can trigger explosive behaviour.

Create Safe Relationships

Children begin to heal through safe and trusting relationships. Be there, be consistent, and try to understand what they are feeling.

Spend time playing with and getting to know a child. Take time to talk with him and find out about his interests. If the child seems to resist the relationship, move slowly, and do not push too hard. Eventually, the child will see you as a safe adult. Then the relationship can blossom.

Prevent Triggers

All of these will help children feel safe, but sometimes you need to do a little more to create safety. If you know what triggers a child or what activities and transitions are the most challenging for her, think about what you can do to prevent that trigger. For example, if a child reacts when it is time to come inside, something as simple as walking inside together can disarm the trigger. Be creative, and you will find that creating safety is a very powerful tool in the lives of traumatized children.