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# Helping Children Experiencing Trauma to Handle Strong Emotions in the Classroom

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## INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with “A Child’s Perspective of a Traumatic Experience” by Sesame Street in Communities. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

## Goals

- ◆ Connect emotionally with children in your classroom who may be experiencing strong emotions due to traumatic situations experienced outside of the classroom.
- ◆ Understand that children exposed to trauma feel overwhelming stress that may result in difficulties regulating and expressing emotions in the classroom.
- ◆ Recognize that, when in the classroom, children exposed to trauma depend on teachers to help them handle strong emotions.

## Activity

- ◆ Watch the clip (~2 minutes). Sesame Street in Communities developed this clip to illustrate a child’s experience of a traumatic event. **The video contains sensitive content and is intended for adult use only.**
  - It uses domestic violence as a trauma example. However, the message extends to other type of events that elicit overwhelming stress such as physical or sexual abuse, sudden loss of or separation from a family member, or racial trauma.
- ◆ After watching the clip, use the questions below to guide your reflection on supporting children’s emotions when they experience trauma outside of the classroom.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed.

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**“In the hands of every caring adult is the power to help change the story.”**

**Sesame Street in Communities**

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What caught your attention from the clip? What made that meaningful to you?

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- ◆ This clip showed children’s emotions and reactions to a traumatic event that elicits overwhelming stress. Connecting emotionally with children’s experiences is the key to empathize with and better support them. To connect emotionally with children:
    - Remember one event in which you experienced overwhelming stress (e.g., the loss of a loved one or being involved in an accident – it does not need to be related to violence).
    - What strong emotions come to you when remembering such event? In what ways did those strong emotions affect your relationships, your work performance, or other aspects of your life beyond the immediate situation?
    - Now go back to think about the children in the clip. In what ways do you think that exposure to trauma outside of school may “carry to” and affect children in the classroom?

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- ◆ The clip illustrates trauma from the perspective of two different children: an infant and a preschooler. What specific emotions and behaviors did you notice from each child? How were the children’s reactions similar and different?
    - Identify the children in your classroom that you know (or suspect) may be experiencing some type of trauma. For each of these children, write a short sentence describing how that child tends to react emotionally in the classroom.
    - Why do you think that being aware of each child’s emotional “style” is important to help them handle strong emotions?

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- ◆ According to Sesame Street, this video was created to “highlight the powerful role of caring adults.” In the clip, an adult caregiver:
    - Acknowledges and accepts children’s strong emotions (“I know you are scared”).
    - Reassures them that things will be ok (“You’re safe now”).

In the classroom, teachers are caring adults for children. How do you think that these two adult behaviors help children exposed to trauma when they experience strong emotions in the classroom?

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- ◆ Sometimes, children can experience overwhelming emotions (or even physical symptoms) when they are reminded of a traumatic experience. This can be called a “trigger.”
    - How might a raised voice in the classroom (e.g., to redirect a child or the group) unintentionally be a potential “trigger” for the children in this video?
    - What else could be a “trigger” for some children in your classroom for you to avoid?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about working with children experiencing trauma to help them learn how to manage their emotions:

- ◆ **Source:** Edutopia
- ◆ **Blog:** How Children Process Grief and Loss Through Play
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-children-process-grief-and-loss-through-play>
- ◆ **Description:** In this online blog, you will learn about the power of play to help young children manage feelings related to traumatic grief or separation. After reading this blog, you will be inspired to create the conditions to encourage children to express themselves through play to help them regulate their emotions.

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- ◆ **Source:** Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC)
  - ◆ **Webinar:** Help Me Calm Down! Teaching Children How to Cope with Their Big Emotions
  - ◆ **Link:** <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teacher-time-series/help-me-calm-down-teaching-children-how-cope-their-big-emotions>
  - ◆ **Description:** In this Teacher Time webinar, you will learn about emotion regulation and how to help children calm down after experiencing a strong emotion, such as disappointment. You will also watch short clips of Head Start teachers supporting children's emotion regulation across the country. Although this webinar is not intended to be specific to children experiencing trauma, most strategies discussed are relevant and applicable to them as well.