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## The Power of Play for Addressing Trauma in the Early Years

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### INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with “The Power of Play for Addressing Trauma in the Early Years,” written by Julie Nicholson and adapted by Sarah Nativ. 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

- ◆ Understand how adult-supported play can help young children exposed to trauma feel safe before fully engaging with peers.
- ◆ Reflect on your current practices and plan to use concrete strategies to support children to develop social skills.

### Activity

- ◆ Read the article.
- ◆ Use the questions below to consider how you will address trauma by helping young children manage stress, learn social-emotional skills, and build resilience through play.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ The article explains that “Young children—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers— affected by trauma often feel unsafe and too frightened to play. When they do play, they often experience little sense of joy, adventure, discovery, or imagination.” Because infants and toddlers are just beginning to develop the ability to communicate with others, they rely on their behavior to express themselves.
  - How might a child who feels unsafe or too frightened to play express those feelings during choice time or outdoor play? What behaviors would you see?
  - How might these feelings affect children’s interactions with peers during play? How might other children react? Why is it important to be mindful of this?

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- ◆ Play can be a powerful tool to help young children cope with stressors from trauma, learn social-emotional skills (including friendship skills), and build resilience.
    - How can adult-child play help children who have experienced trauma begin to build the skills they need to make and maintain friendships?
    - Think of a time you joined in on peer play to scaffold and model friendship skills. How did this help children engage, connect, and interact? Why might it be helpful for adults to support friendship skills *during* peer play for children who have experienced trauma?

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- ◆ To help children exposed to trauma feel safe and ready to engage in play, the handout highlights that structured and sensory play may provide a “less threatening entry into play.”
    - Consider how you might modify environments and facilitate activities for children to feel safe and comfortable enough to engage in play, either alone, near, or with others (depending on their needs).
    - Why is it important for children who have experienced trauma to feel safe when interacting with their peers and building friendship skills?

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- ◆ The article recommends facilitating various types of play: structured play, sensory play, music and movement, large-motor activities, self-directed and adult-child play, which can all help children in a variety of different ways. Consider each child in your class that you know (or suspect) may be experiencing some type of trauma or adversity.
    - Based on children’s needs, how might you incorporate the different types of play to support children exposed to trauma in managing stress, feeling safe, and building resilience?
      - How are you going to remember to do this?
      - When will you incorporate these into your plans for play?
      - How will you modify your plans for play support and meet each child where they are?
    - Regularly check in on your plan. Assess its impact on children and adjust as needed.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about how trauma may affect how we support children’s friendship skills:

- ◆ **Source:** Virtual Lab School
- ◆ **Video:** “Building Resilience Through Relationships”
- ◆ **Link:** <https://stream.virtuallabschool.org/trauma/5471/5471-480.mp4>
- ◆ **Description:** This video explores how children exposed to trauma benefit from “relational wealth” (i.e., relationships with others, including adults and peers) to heal and build resilience.



- ◆ **Source:** Oregon Social Learning Center-KITS
- ◆ **Article:** “Helping Children who Have Experienced Trauma to Make Friends”
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.kidsintransitiontoschool.org/helping-children-who-have-experienced-trauma-to-make-friends/>
- ◆ **Description:** This article provides suggestions for ways adults can help children who have experienced trauma to learn social skills and make friends.