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POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS TO UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO BEHAVIOUR

BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

Our goal is to support children to heal from the trauma they have experienced and equip them to become healthy, functioning adults. However, as recovery is dependent on relational healing, we need to reframe our traditional views of discipline, and begin making meaning of children's behaviour to truly help them grow

Observation vs meaning

All children can have challenging behaviours from time to time, but for children who have experienced trauma, managing such behaviour can be more complex. Why they are behaving in a certain way may not be obvious, and disciplining them with traditional methods may not work.

When we ask children to think about their behaviour, we are asking them to use the part of their brain responsible for higher cortical thinking. But, in the heat of the moment children don't have access

to this part of their brain because they feel threatened. Instead, we need to create a safe environment for the child to then help us understand their behaviour, and choose discipline based on what the child **needs**, not on our **sense** of justice. Responding to behaviour should always centre on the principles of:



Creating a safe environment

The table below provides examples of how you can shift your approach to managing challenging behaviour to better understand what a child needs.

SITUATION - <i>Child feels threatened...</i> ✘	SAFETY - <i>What the child needs from you...</i> ✔
The child is misbehaving on purpose, defiant or poorly motivated, choosing to not follow your instructions and requests. <i>Implication: Heightened responses will continue, and the child will experience shame as your focus is on the misbehaviour rather than their needs.</i>	The child communicates their needs through behaviour. The child needs you to stay calm and be mindful of responses being triggered in yourself. You need to reflect on what triggered the behaviour and adjust your expectations to consider the child's developmental abilities and history.
The child is starting a power struggle with you. You feel you need to assert your power and win the struggle. <i>Implication: Engaging with the power struggle will continue to heighten both you and the child and reinforce the child's perceived need for control.</i>	The child has developed a need to be in control to keep themselves safe and is testing you to see how you will respond. You need to prove to the child that they are in a secure relationship with you.
The child needs 'time out' to calm down and think about what they have done. <i>Implication: Isolating the child is more likely to increase their stress and lead them to develop unhealthy ways to regulate their emotions.</i>	The child needs you to be present to teach them how to calm their nervous system down. The child needs 'time in' with you to learn to identify their physical and emotional states and how to express these in appropriate ways.
The child needs to be punished and needs to learn consequences to ensure they do not behave this way again. <i>Implication: This threatens the child's relationship with you and is likely to further trigger a fight, flight or freeze response. Further, generally the child will not learn how to behave and punishment may cause their behaviour to worsen.</i>	When the child is calm and can think clearly, empower the child by working with them to make sense of why they behaved the way they did, problem-solve and agree on natural consequences for their behaviour.



Check out Part 3 in our positive behaviour support series. It gives you tips for supporting children to regulate their emotions.

Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > Australian Association for Infant Mental Health (2009/2016). *Time out: Position Paper 3*. NSW, Australia: Australian Association for Infant Mental Health
- > *10 Tips for Disciplining Traumatized Children* by Barbara Tantrum

