

Helping Children to Regulate Their Emotions

Self Soothing/Calming Themselves Down

Childhood trauma including sexual assault, physical, emotional abuse and neglect has been linked to a number of emotional and behavioural concerns. This is often due to the impact trauma has on early brain development. In brain development the two main sides (left and right hemisphere) of the brain have specific functions. For example the left hemisphere is in control of language and logical thought. The right hemisphere of the brain is responsible for memories and emotions. In healthy brain development the two sides of the brain need to integrate and work together in order for people to think logically. In children and adults who have experienced trauma or abuse from a young age their brains can be under developed, linking to symptoms such as difficulty in calming themselves down when they are exposed to stress. They could have trouble calming themselves down when they are distressed/angry/anxious etc, recognising other peoples emotions, understanding the consequences of their actions , lack of self control and lack of social awareness. This can also lead to concerns regarding children's attachment to their parents and how well they bond.

Therefore, if your child has experienced abuse or trauma you may find that disciplining them doesn't seem to work, it all seems to go in one ear and out the other or you tell them off and they get even worse. This is very normal behaviour for children who have experienced trauma as they often do not have control over their emotions therefore normal discipline and reasoning usually doesn't work.

Children who have experienced complex trauma may:

- Try to control situations, especially feelings & behaviours of attachment figures
- Engage in power struggles and are compelled to win them
- Feel empowered by saying "No!"
- Cause emotional and, at times, physical pain to others
- Strongly maintain a negative self-concept
- Have a limited ability to regulate their emotions
- Often avoid reciprocal fun, engagement and laughter
- Avoid needing anyone or asking for help and favours
- Avoid being loved and feeling special to someone

What can I do then?

- Normal development in infancy requires parents or carers to help children learn how to react to situations, through soothing and stimulation. Therefore soothing and comforting them during times of stress, assists the child to develop the skills needed to cope with future stress.
- The caregiver leads the child and teaches them feelings by putting words to their experience, i.e. I can see that you are upset now, I wonder if you are feeling angry? If that happened to me I feel sad or scared I wonder how you feel?

- Help the child to regulate their body and to teach physical boundaries by safely holding them, safely touching, safely playing with and comforting them.
- Be present with the child and speak calmly and quietly, inviting them to talk and be with you.
- Maintain eye contact, remain confident and if giving directions make sure they are clear and simple.
- Use quiet and melodic words, music singing and humming can be soothing for children.
- Withdraw from any triggering environments. Therefore if you know something or someone upsets, scares or angers your child, remove them from that stress.
- Actions, sounds and movements at the speed of 80 beats per minute are experienced in the womb. Babies associate these behaviours with the sensation of being warm, safe and soothed. Therefore music and movement activities such as dancing, drumming, singing and massaging that are repetitive and rhythmic can help with the restoration of delayed brain development.
- Eye contact, tone of voice, gestures and touch are actively employed to communicate safety and empathy, be aware of your voice and gestures and don't use them to threaten or coerce your child.
- The adults' own ability to control their emotions serves as a model for the child. For example, if an adult deals with stress and sadness by getting angry and yelling at people then the adult is sending unclear messages which are confusing to the child.
- Try to understand the child's behaviour before responding. I.e. why are they doing that behaviour, what need is being met by them acting that way. Some children will act out angrily if they are scared, this may be their way of protecting themselves when in danger or it may be a way of gaining an adults attention for safety. Try to constantly strive to have empathy for the child and to never forget that 'children do well if they can'.
- Be consistent, predictable and repetitive.
- Provide opportunities for enjoyment, laughter and fun every day, don't use it as a reward and don't take it away as a punishment, just use it.
- Negative behaviours will decrease as sense of safety increases.

How Counselling Can Help

When in counselling, the child is able to remember and explore aspects of traumatic memories and experience the emotion associated with those memories without becoming upset or distressed. The child slowly develops an ability to tolerate increasing amounts of affect/emotion and therefore develops the ability to self regulate or calm themselves down appropriately. This experience triggers brain development and helps the brain to integrate the two sides together therefore enabling the child to make sense (a left-hemisphere function) out of memories and emotions (right hemisphere functions).

References –

Dr Bruce Perry from Child trauma Academy and Trent Saville from Complex Care QLD.



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