

Bare Bone Basics of Working with Traumatized Children and Families

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(Note: this material comes from a series of booklets entitled "The Bare Bone Basics". Titles within this series are: The Bare Bone Basics of: Parenting Children 0-5 Years; Language Tips and Techniques for Home Visitors; Discipline for Children 18 Months-5 Years; Home Visiting 101; Communicating With Your Child 5-18 ; Home Visiting 101; Communicating With Your Child 5-18 Years; Building and Maintaining Intimate Trusting Relationships.)

Characteristics of Traumatized Children Under the Age of 5 Years

- Re-experiencing and acting out the trauma
- Numbing: showing little emotion
- Avoiding situations and reminders of the event
- Jumpy and scared
- New fears
- Limited exploration
- Regressing to an earlier stage of development

Ways to Reduce Stress and Anxiety in Young Children

- Touch and hold the child close and often. *(Over 70% of communication is through body language. The child picks up on this non-verbal communication from the parent/caregiver and reacts behaviorally.)*
- Make explanations of what happened brief and basic; limit your explanations to approximately less than 25 words. *(Young children have little reasoning ability.)*
- Allow the child to sleep near or with the parent/caregiver. *(Initially, the child may want this in order to feel safe.)*
- Allow the child to expend energy through gross motor/big muscle play. *(The child's behavior may be unfocused, scattered, and excessively active or withdrawn.)*
- The parent/caregiver needs to help the child to express feelings by labeling or identifying what the child might be feeling. For example: "I know you were frightened. You are safe now." *(Feelings always precede behavior.)*
- Before the child goes to sleep, assure the child that he/she is safe. If the child awakens during the night, pat the child's back gently. Try not to talk; this will awaken the child further. *(The child may have sleeping issues including nightmares for some time after the traumatic event.)*
- Establish routines as soon as possible even when located in temporary housing. *(Routines help a child feel safe.)*

- Follow the child's lead when she tries to express or release emotions. For example: if the child draws a picture of what happened, listen to the child's explanation. *(When the child uses words, the healing process begins.)*
- Reassure the child that he was not responsible for the traumatic event. *(Children under 5 years often believe that their behaviors or thoughts cause the event. For example, if the child misbehaved yesterday, he may think that his misbehavior is the cause of today's event.)*
- If there has been a death or loss of a family member (including pets): help the child verbalize the emotions or offer language for what the child might not be able to express. *(Because young children have limited expressive vocabulary, try to use concrete explanations.)*

Ways to Re-Empower the Traumatized Family

- The overall goal of working with families who have experienced a trauma is to remind them that they choose how they feel about their situation. One choice is to make the best of it.
- Share your sense of inner strength.
- Listen from your heart.
- Offer sincere feeling words for what they have undergone.
- Gently pivot to the action phase of recovery, offering choices of what could be done today.
- Focus on the person's most critical issue(s) for that moment you are with her.
- Be careful to not overwhelm them with what needs to be done.
- Praise their efforts; this reinforces hope in their lives.
- Focus on one day at a time.

Ways to Reduce Stress and Anxiety for the Trauma Worker

- Before working with traumatized families, ask for the power of protection around yourself. Visualize yourself surrounded with white light.
- Put your emotions in neutral when seeing or hearing trauma.
- Your goal is to return people to the feeling of hopefulness and empowerment by offering choices of what they can do or feel at the present moment.
- At the end of the day, release the family and all the issues you witnessed into the hands of a power greater than your own.
- Do something to release and let go of the negative energy you absorbed during the day such as a physical activity, meditation, journaling, or bathing.

Remember: You are a light in their temporary world of darkness. The greatest gift we give is our own sense of joy, hopefulness, and appreciation.