

Creating Safety for the Traumatized Child or Teen

Michelle Pendzimas

Vulnerable and at-risk children and teens are hurting. They have experienced significant life events, such as abuse, war, abandonment, and poverty. Their world has not been safe. So how do you create safety for a child or teen who might think that he will never be safe?

Understand Trauma in Children

Children and teens experiencing trauma may feel overwhelmed and helpless. They may have an overactive alarm system that is easily triggered. They move into the “Fight, Flight, or Freeze” mode very quickly. They cannot think clearly. Feeling safe is what calms their trauma response. (Read “The Trauma Response: Fight, Flight, or Freeze.”)

Understand What Triggers a Traumatized Child

Knowing what your children or teens have been through will help you to understand their behavior. Learn what a young person does well and what she struggles with so you can build on her strengths. Learn what triggers the child or teen to fight, flee, or freeze. If you know the trigger, you can often plan for, prevent, and respond to these situations with success. (Read “The Trauma Response: Understanding Triggers.”)

Create a Safe Environment

Whenever possible, be consistent. Children and teens feel safe when they know who is caring for them. Also be sure everyone treats the children and teens in the same way. Young people feel safe when they know what to expect from the adults in their lives.

Trauma is triggered by the unknown and unexpected. Consistency creates predictability and feelings of safety. Provide consistent routines. When things need to change, give the children or teens plenty of information to help them deal with the change.

Provide transition warnings when change is coming. For example, if you need to clean up at 10:00 a.m., inform children at 9:55 that it is almost time to clean up. If your Sunday school class will be walking around the building during the lesson, let the teens know at the beginning of class. Telling them what to expect gives them a sense of control. Suddenly being asked to stop an activity and move quickly to something else or being asked to do something unexpected can trigger explosive behavior.

Create Safe Relationships

Children and teens begin to heal through safe and trusting relationships. Be there, be consistent, and try to understand what they are feeling.

Spend time playing with and getting to know a child. Take time to talk with a teen and find out about his interests. If the child or teen seems to resist the relationship, move slowly, and do not push too hard. Eventually, the child or teen will see you as a safe adult. Then the relationship can blossom.

Prevent Triggers

All of these will help children and teens feel safe, but sometimes you need to do a little more to create safety. If you know what triggers a child or what activities and transitions are the most challenging for a teen, think about what you can do to prevent that trigger. For example, if a child reacts when it is time to come inside, something as simple as walking inside together can disarm the trigger. Be creative, and you will find that creating safety is a very powerful tool in the lives of traumatized children and teens.