

Healing Relational Trauma Through Play

Training Handouts

Children: They why and how of their play

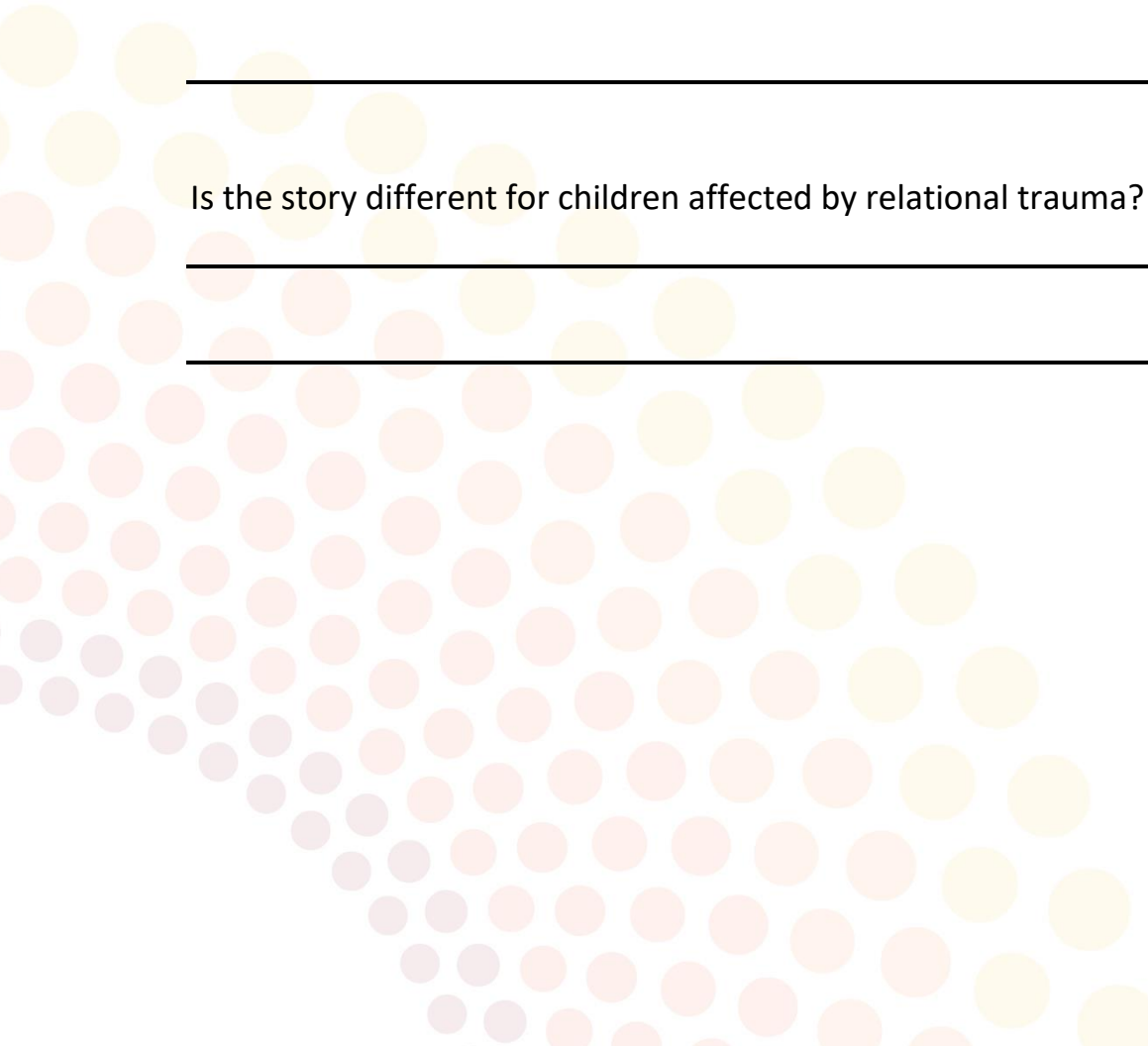
What do we know about children whose play is:

Solitary

Parallel

Co-operative

Is the story different for children affected by relational trauma?



Types of Play



What do we know about the different types of children's play?

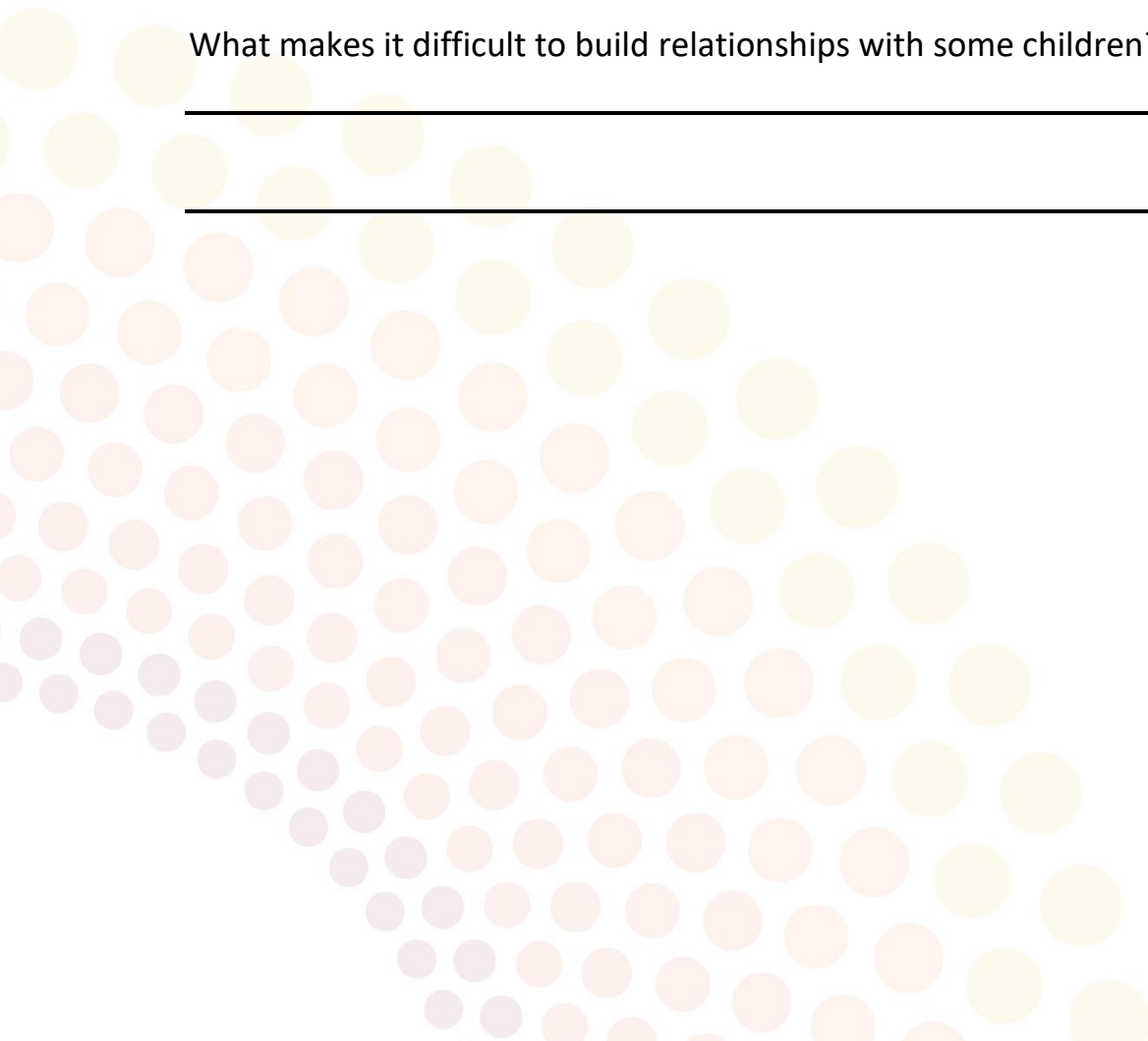
How might the story be different for children affected by relational trauma?

Children and relationships

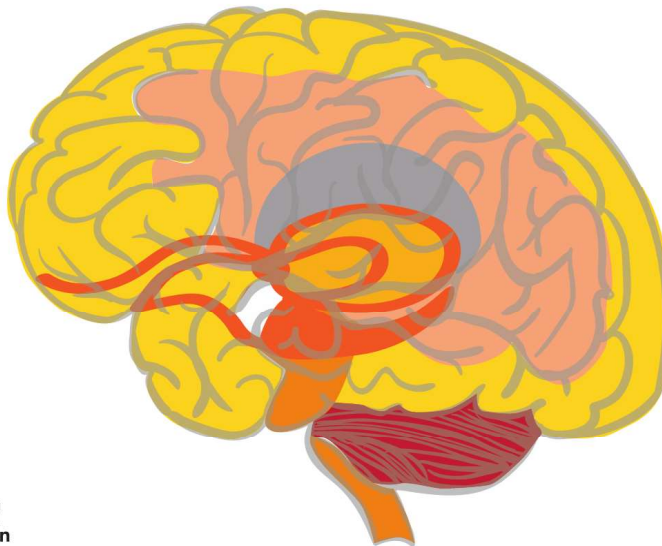
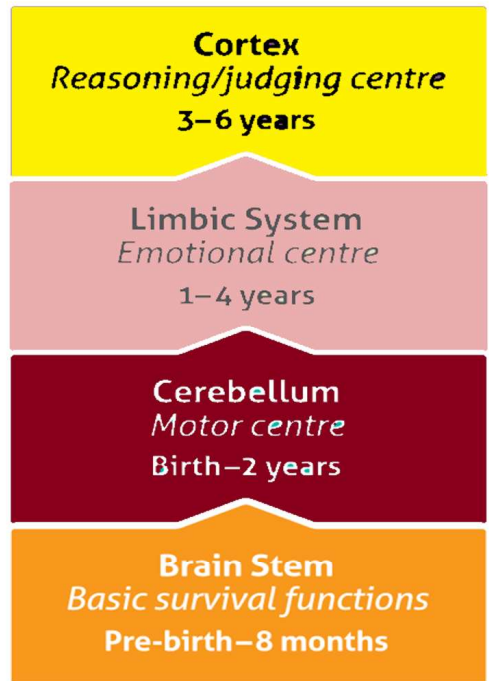
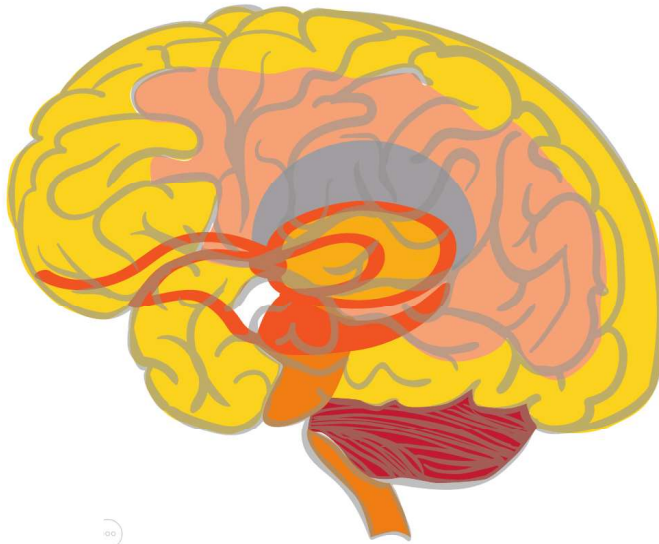
What do you do to build relationships with children?

Think about which children are the easiest to build relationships with. Why do you think this is?

What makes it difficult to build relationships with some children?



Bottom-up brain development



The brain is comprised of different structures that grow and develop at different rates and different times.

The **brain stem** area of the brain develops first and is responsible for basic functions that **keep us alive** such as heart rate, breathing and regulating our body temperature. The brain stem is fully developed at birth. It is the part of the brain that is 'hard wired' and least susceptible to change.

Connected to the brain stem is the **cerebellum** or motor centre of the brain. This area is responsible for **movement** and develops over the first few years of life. Development in this area is seen in babies gaining head control, sitting, crawling and walking. In the next few years, children will gain greater co-ordination, learn to skip, kick a ball, ride a bicycle, cut, draw and eat with cutlery.

The **limbic system** is the **emotional** centre of the brain and rules the lives of young children up to around four years. During the toddler years, the limbic system goes through a period of rapid development. This helps explain their bursts of irrational behaviour and tantrums. Toddlers need our help to manage their **strong** feelings. Young children **feel** then **act**, they **can't think** then **act**. This is due to the emotional centre of their brain developing before the cortex, or the thinking part of their brain. Young children basically view the world through an emotional lens.

The **cortex**, or thinking part of the brain, is the last part to develop. This is the part of the brain responsible for reasoning, planning and problem solving. This is the part of the brain that enables humans to **think** before they **act**. As children grow and develop, the cortex is gradually able to help us to pause when we are flooded by **strong** emotions, thus allowing us to **feel, think, then act**.

Unlike the brain stem, the limbic system and cortex are highly susceptible to change due to experience and the environment in which the child lives.

Building safety and connection

- Children affected by trauma need stable, safe, consistent environments and relationships to help them to be calm and open to learning
- Safety = predictable and consistent routines, consistent relationships and consistent responses

One important way that we can help children have a sense of SAFETY, is to provide PREDICTABILITY in their day.....a sense that 'I know what's coming next.'

- Focus on creating an environment that is predictable and familiar
- Always prepare child for what is coming up next
- Establish a supportive pattern of one to one communication with child
- Be particularly sensitive to transition experiences

Predictability: a metaphor for SAFETY

Children affected by trauma experience any change as a potential threat.

Consistency is vitally important to traumatised children.

Protective and predictable relationship provides security.

Building predictability

Predictability is achieved by:

- Reliable routines, e.g. greeting children at the door with a consistent signal - high 5/handshake, same beginning/ending rituals
- Using visual cues to help children prepare – sequencing...better to use photos of the actual child/activity, than clipart
- Preparing children for what's coming next
- Talking to children about your intentions
- Same workers every day

Children require consistency and predictability to reduce their stress

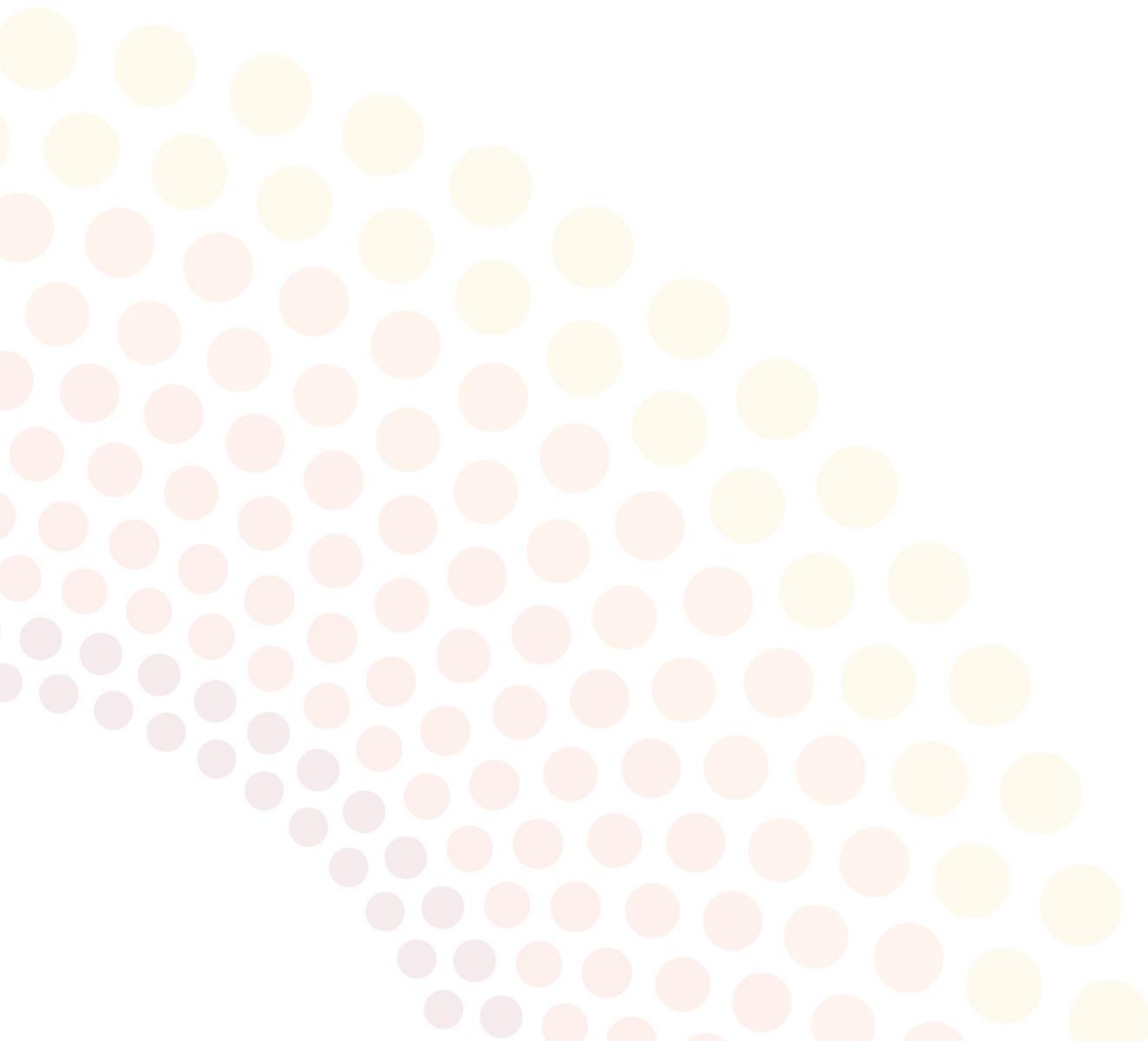
- Traumatized children will come to trust and rely on you as their reference point - as an interpreter of their environment
- Over time, traumatized children will build an internal platform for responding to change
- Traumatized children will learn to use others as a resource to support them

Predictability is achieved by:

- Asking permission before touch
- Beginning and ending group sessions with same activity
- Giving warning when activity is about to end

Think about your service for young children – what do you do that is the same every time you meet with the child?

Why do you have these routines? What is their purpose?



Suggestions to help children to regulate

- Calm box
 - Soothing
 - Soothing sensory input
 - Musical, rhythmic speech
 - Engage children in actions which are rhythmical and synchronous with others
- Other
 - Guided Imagery/meditation/relaxation
 - Bubbles
 - Breathing exercises
 - Yoga
 - Massage
 - Rhyme, Rhythm & Repetition
 - Create a 'Calm Down' space and help children learn to take themselves there when stressed
 - 'Cool down' time after heightened physical activity

By feeling less blamed, traumatised children will feel more supported and connected.

Traumatised children will come up with and use plans to stay calm or become calm that makes sense to them.

You will be able to respond rather than react.

We can help regulate the hills and valleys of their emotions, helping their autonomic nervous systems learn how to respond. How can we do this:

- Through grounding breath – we can take a deep breath as we move towards the child
- Through movement – we could gently sway or rock
- Staying connected to ourselves
- Being present – be able to “sit” with the child through their dysregulation

The result is the children get to experience what it feels like to move from a state of dysregulation back to a state of regulation.

Benefits of superhero/war play

Benefits of superhero/war play

- Self-control
- Self-regulation
- Role playing
- Friendship
- Empathy
- Moral development
- Exercise their imagination
- Problem solving e.g. where do I hide, how can I get away
- Belonging, being part of a group
- Developing confidence (Including quieter children having the opportunity to taking on a more confident personia)
- Learning to cooperate
- Learning their own limits as to what is to rough.
- Understanding the rules of consent and safety (e.g. you can only chase people who have agree to participate)
- Empowerment (take initiative, make decisions, problem solve)

“There is certainly no evidence that playing with toy guns [or] pretending to shoot predicts aggressive behavior, so the good news is that we don’t need to worry when we see children engaging in this type of play,” says Caroline Kerns, a clinical psychologist at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago.

“Superheroes have such meaning for little boys,” says Cummings. “It’s a way of identifying with someone who’s brave, who doesn’t shy away from danger—someone who has these wonderful talents and attributes used for good in the world. In stories like *Star Wars*, it’s always good triumphing over evil. Those are positive values.” Cummings feels we should be encouraging imaginative play that’s well regulated and reciprocal, not discouraging it. “Play fighting is very natural; don’t shame or forbid it,” she says.

“Aggression is a symptom of the sympathetic nervous system activation when a child is perceiving a threat or challenge.... It is a normal biological response that arises when our sense of safety or our ideas about who we think we are, who others are supposed to be, and how we think the world is supposed to operate are compromised...” Lisa Dion
Aggression in play therapy.

Useful Links:

<https://heydeeho.com.au/benefits-of-superhero-play/>

<https://www.prestigepreschoolacademy.com/the-value-of-superhero-play/>

https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/supporting_super_hero_play_in_child_care_strategies

<https://www.scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/war-play-bad-kids.html>