



Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

Helping Children Feel Safe

How can you help a child who is exhibiting challenging behaviors to feel secure and safe? The challenging child may be angry and defiant, withdrawn and non-compliant, or the first to misbehave when your back is turned. It may be difficult to remember that the behavior often stems from a need for safety and a sense of belonging, however your response in helping the child feel safe will make a difference in her life.

For some children, their behavior is an indication that they may be struggling to cope with stress or perhaps even toxic stress (strong, frequent, prolonged adversity) brought on by traumatic experiences. Trauma can result from any event that is physically or emotionally harmful. According to “A Place Where All Children Can Thrive” by Barbara Tokarz, these events may include:

- ♥ natural disasters
- ♥ physical or sexual assault
- ♥ loss of a parent
- ♥ a serious accident or illness
- ♥ witnessing domestic or community violence.

Whether or not your child has experienced traumatic experiences, you play an important role in helping your child feel safe by the way you respond to her and through your positive interactions. You can make a difference by:

- ♥ Providing a safe environment
- ♥ Providing regulation strategies
- ♥ Responding with “in the moment” strategies

In this newsletter, we will discuss these supportive strategies for each age group of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.



This newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child’s development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Resources:** for more information about this topic, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.

Infants

Babies can feel, hear, and even react to the sounds of raised voices even before birth. The sounds of fighting and angry voices, along with the stress that the baby feels from mom can actually affect the growing baby's brain. However, a baby can also be calmed by the sound of a mom's voice talking, singing, or laughing. Other calming strategies for infants include:

- ♥ **Providing a safe environment-** A safe place for infants begins with you! Responding to an infant's basic needs and cues will help her to begin to trust you.
- ♥ **Regulation strategies-** Help soothe the infant with rhythmic sounds, touch, and movement. For example, try the 5 S's: swaddle baby and gently sway back and forth, up and down while whispering "shhh, shhh," in a rhythmic voice; hold baby on her side, tummy down on your arm; help her to soothe herself by offering something to suck such as a pacifier or even a clean finger.



- ♥ **"In the moment" strategies-** All babies have different needs. Notice what upsets baby and respond with care. For example, does the sound of the rubbish truck upset her? Try soothing techniques such as holding her close to you and humming a familiar tune.

Activity for Infants: *Baby Massage*

What You Need:

- Blanket
- Soothing music (optional)

What to Do:

1. Place baby on her back on a blanket and turn on soft soothing music.
2. Gently stroke away from the heart (shoulder to wrist) for relaxation.
3. Name baby's body parts as you massage (e.g., "Let's massage your arm.")
4. Gently hold baby's thigh, gently squeezing and stroking all the way to the ankle.
5. Draw tiny circles on baby's head with your fingers.
6. Draw an oval on baby's tummy in a clockwise direction to aid digestion.
7. If baby starts to fuss or turn away at any time, that's okay. You can always try again when she is ready.

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)



Toddlers

Toddlers who have experienced trauma may have difficulty connecting to adults and peers while regulating their emotions. You can help toddlers feel safe by:

- ♥ **Providing a safe environment-** You may create a sense of safety with a predictable routine and thoughtfully planned transitions. If there is a change in the child's normal schedule, prepare her ahead of time. For example let her know, "It is a rainy day, so we are not going to the playground after snack. Instead, we are going to dance to music after snack."
- ♥ **Regulation strategies-** Provide a rhythmic environment to activate the brainstem which targets and organizes the child's brain chemistry. For example, play a CD, dance, sing, or use a drum or rhythm sticks to tap to a repetitive beat. Have toddlers practice modulation (e.g., sing in a soft voice/loud voice; make your feet go fast/slow).



- ♥ **"In the moment" strategies-** Allow your toddler acceptable ways to process her emotions. For example say, "I can see you are angry, but you may not hit your friends. Let's stomp on bubble wrap or crumple and throw paper balls into a basket."

Activity for Toddlers: *Breathing and Blowing*

What You Need:
None

What to Do:

1. Show your child how to hold up 5 fingers. Say, "These are my five candles. We are going to blow them out one at a time."
2. Blow out slowly, curling one finger down at each breath.
3. *Teach this activity at a time when the toddler is calm. After she learns the steps, use this strategy to help her regulate her emotions when she is upset.



(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)

Preschoolers

Preschoolers may be experiencing stress from a variety of things: small things such as not wanting to eat certain foods or sharing a special toy with others to bigger things such as separation from parents when they go to work or school or hearing loved ones fight. Preschoolers can also experience anxiety when they see disturbing images on TV or hear talk of natural disasters and they don't fully understand what is going on. You can help calm your child by:

- ♥ **Providing a safe environment-** Give her lots of opportunities for open ended materials such as sand, water, and playdough, along with dramatic play. She may use these opportunities to recreate situations that concern her and you can help her talk through these situations in a way that is comfortable for her.
- ♥ **Regulation strategies-** Provide opportunities to practice impulse control in fun and nonthreatening ways such as Simon Says. Remind the child by saying, "Now remember, don't move your body unless Simon Says! Simon Says, clap your hands." Clap your



hands with the child. Say, "Stomp your feet." If the child stomps her feet, say, "Oops! Simon didn't say stomp your feet. Let's try again!"

- ♥ **"In the moment" strategies-** Support the child by providing a caring response and guiding the child to a cozy area filled with soft pillows, blankets, stuffed animals, soft music, and a few books. You can even create a cozy area by using a large box and cutting a hole to create a safe space. Encourage the child to use this when she is feeling overwhelmed and needs help to calm down.

Activity for Preschoolers: *The Challenge Game*

What You Need:

Musical instrument or party horn

What to Do:

1. Give the child an instrument or party horn and say, "We are going to have a challenge game! See if you can blow the horn but only when you hear the magic word __ (e.g., unicorn)."
2. Say random words such as, "Pizza, Slipper, Baseball, Unicorn!"
3. Alternatively, make up some silly sentences with the word unicorn such as, "I went for a walk and met a unicorn (blow the horn). I was so surprised that I tripped and fell into a puddle. The unicorn (blow the horn) blew some dust on me and I flew into the air!"
4. If a child makes a mistake, say, "Oops! That's okay, let's try again."

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)



How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

Physical Development

- ♥ Learn through her senses
- ♥ Use and strengthen large muscles

Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Learn to cooperate with others
- ♥ Feel important and good about herself

Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Build vocabulary skills
- ♥ Increase her observation, listening and understanding skills, and attention span

Cognitive Development

- ♥ Develop her creativity and imagination
- ♥ Understand cause and effect



Kids in the Kitchen

Cooking teaches valuable lessons such as math (quantities, measurement), science (how matter changes), fine motor (stirring, pouring), and literacy (print awareness). As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show her how to handle items safely and allow her to do as much as she is capable of. Praise her efforts, and ask questions throughout the process to encourage her thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

Mr. Pita Rabbit

Adapted from <https://geauxaskalice.com/mr-pita-rabbit/>

Ingredients:

- 1 pkg. mini pitas (or bagels)
- 1 bag pretzel sticks
- 1 box raisins
- 1 container flavored cream cheese or favorite spread
- 1 c shredded carrots, to feed Mr. Pita Rabbit

Directions:

1. Cut one of the pitas in half to make the ears.
2. Shred a medium carrot for the nose.
3. Show the child how to spread the cream cheese on the pita.
4. Arrange with the halved ears on the top of the whole pita to make a rabbit face.
5. Add raisins for the eyes, carrot for nose and pretzels for whiskers.
6. Serve alongside a bowl of shredded carrots.



Resources

Piplo Productions

<http://piploproductions.com/>

Piplo Productions produces books, videos, and other resources to support children and families recovering from stressful or traumatic events.

Shelter From the Storm: A Parent Guide

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1663-shelter-from-the-storm-a-parent-guide>

This guide includes tips and guidance for parents of children experiencing trauma. This resource helps parents understand new or challenging behaviors and how to deal with them.



Suggested Books

Discover these books and more at the **Hawai'i State Public Library** www.librarieshawaii.org.

Infants and Toddlers

Baby Bear, Baby Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin Jr.

Baby Bear consists of the familiar word patterns of the other books in the series. Your child will love the interesting animals illustrated by Eric Carle along with the predictable and repetitive text.

Baby Faces Peekaboo by Dawn Sirett and Rachael Paritt

This lift-a-flap book is filled with an adorable assortment of baby faces. The expressions on the babies' faces is a great introduction into emotional literacy.

Preschoolers

Kona and His Hard Shell by Crissy Miyake

Kona is a young crab living in the waters off Hawai'i island. After experiencing a terrifying storm, Kona learns how to cope with the traumatic experience with the help of his loving mother.

Breathe Like a Bear by Kira Wiley

This beautifully illustrated book teaches children simple breathing techniques for managing their stress and anxiety. The book is filled with 30 simple mindful moments to feel calm and focused.



Learning to Grow is a project of the University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, with funding from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services. Visit our website at www.learningtogrowhawaii.org or visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii