




MUSIC & HEALING TRAUMA

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UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma is defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is an emotional response to a distressing event such as an accident, crime or natural disaster.



It is also an emotional response to neglect, and experiencing forms of abuse (emotional, verbal, physical) as well as observing physical abuse. These overwhelming experiences can have a profound impact on those experiencing these events, causing the mind and brain to reorganize the way in which it perceives information or experiences.

Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk states in his groundbreaking book, *The Body Keeps The Score*, that

“trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain and body.”

In order to create change, the body must learn that the danger is no longer present.

The human brain is an amazing organ that learns rapidly, and the emotional center of the brain not only learns faster than our more logical areas of the brain, but it retains this lesson without a sense of time. This ability evolved as a survival mechanism for the human species.





In order for traumatized individuals to develop new ways of thinking, we must engage the safety mechanism within the brain. All children (traumatized or not) learn best through play, movement, and modeling. Music is a form of both play and movement.

Children do not process words nearly as effectively as adults. This is due to developmental stages; it is a critical difference between children and adults.

Even so, emerging therapies for traumatized adults now include nonverbal interventions to engage the brain differently, and often more effectively, through music, art, and even adult play therapy.



The best methods to assist children with challenging behavior which has resulted from trauma is to engage with them in music, movement and play.



This booklet is intended to equip parents with simple, effective tools to help children who have suffered trauma as well as empower your family to work together.

MUSIC & HEALING TRAUMA

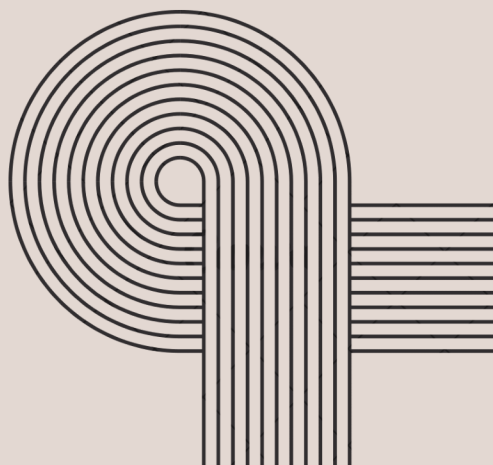
Calming the nervous system is a primary goal. Children who have been through trauma live in a constant state of hypervigilance (hypervigilance occurs in the emotional center of the brain because it quickly learns how to survive, ESPECIALLY in situations of danger). This hypervigilance can cause a manifestation of angry and/or disruptive behaviors. Emotional regulation is a critical need in managing the effects of trauma or neglect.

Emotional-regulation techniques include movement, rhythm and mindfulness. Science offers additional explanations for this when we understand that frequencies are vibrations. Frequencies are created by sounds in musical instruments and from singing. If you've ever heard of students listening to music while studying because it improves focus, it is because frequencies create nervous system vibrations that positively affect the listener's heartbeat and brainwaves.





This effect is amplified by a child actively engaged in music, such as playing drums, guitar, piano, violin, etc. or through singing. Psychological research suggests that singing in choirs reduces depression in adults. This is in part due to frequencies created by singing and the subsequent vibrations that result from it.



Before we learn these techniques, it is important to consider the environment we are creating. Each of us creates energy, often generated by our moods, and as adults and parents, we cultivate an environment within ourselves and our homes. It is often done out of habit, what we learned as children, or as a reaction to events we may not control; nevertheless, you can likely think of a “feeling” you experienced visiting family or friends’ homes, or even different businesses. The same is true at home and creates a form of “normal” for children.



This energy will set the tone of the type of relationships we are developing. In order to heal from trauma, it is necessary for a child to feel safety, connection, within a warm, loving and stable environment.

1. Intention: What type of environment are we creating?

2. Clapping rhythms, moving to music, stretching and exercise





Playing an instrument, singing or playing calming music is an effective tool to calm the nervous system and activate the parasympathetic nervous system. This will have a profound effect on mental, emotional and even physical responses within the body helping a child to be in a better state of mind, able to accept new information and also self regulate.

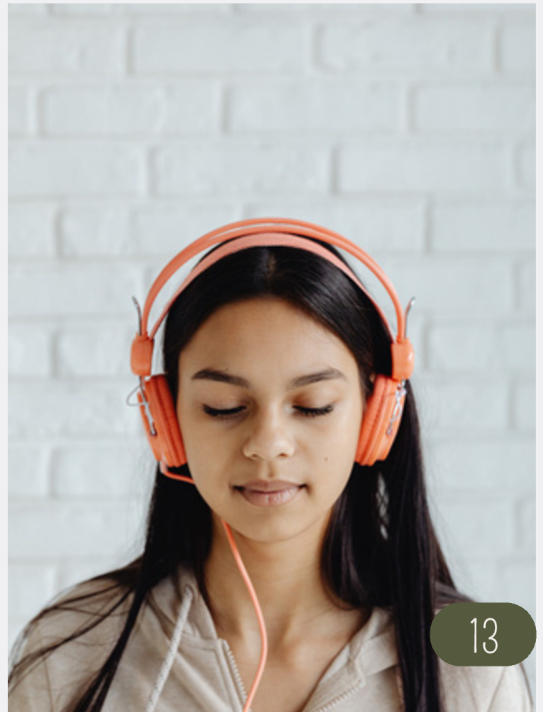
PRACTICAL DAILY TOOLS

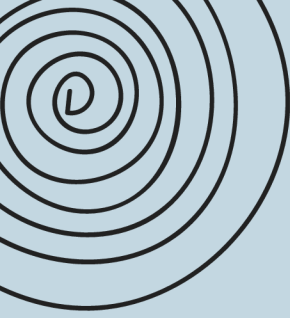
MORNING ROUTINE

Mornings are an important time for us to set the intention for the day. As a foster parent/parent, we have the opportunity each morning to create an environment that will prepare a child for the day that sets a positive tone and helps to not upset the nervous system.



- Play soft instrumental music particularly songs with nature sounds such as water and birds singing are known to calm the nervous system
- Create a playlist together of soft, warm and loving sounds and affirmations. Affirmations can be simple sentences welcoming positive thoughts and feelings (even in the form of a short prayer you may often say with your child). Affirmations and prayers that align with a parent's intentions can create a ritual that brings comfort.
- Take 30 - 60 seconds to be still and take deep breaths along with meditative music.

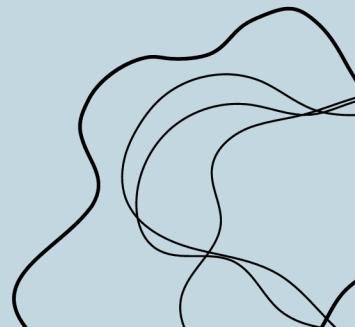


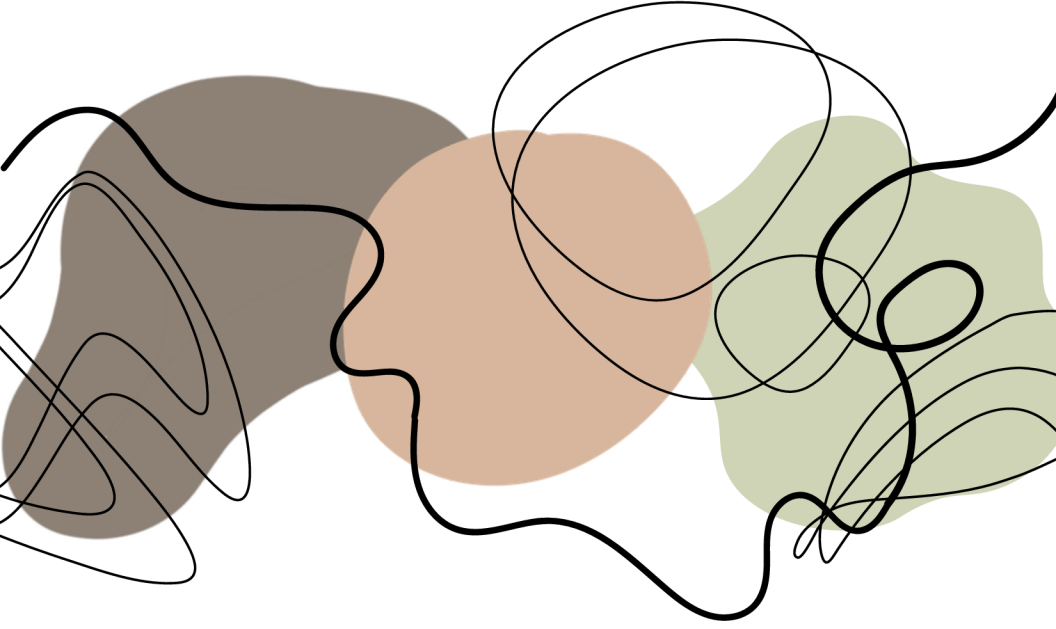


DISRUPTIONS/CONNECTIONS

1. Validate the emotion. For example: “I see/hear that you feel _____” (name the emotion you observe) “It is okay to feel mad/sad/excited”

2. Redirect the behavior through singing, rhythmic exercises, dancing or making up a song. Children often LOVE to create and make up their own music, especially with encouragement and as their confidence builds. Young children respond especially well to an environment that allows this kind of expression, while older children may be hesitant due to the inner critic that develops along with higher grades in school.





For children who are hesitant or self-critical, parents can lead this process by singing themselves (with a track if you are uncomfortable), dancing (silly is even better), or if so inclined, making up a song! If you are willing, your child may surprise you with how easily they engage in music activities like this even when they lack confidence elsewhere!

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Listening to music during schoolwork can help children focus. Music with approximately 60 beats per minute matches an ideal heart rate, interacting with the heart and nervous system of a listener that then feeds information to the brain, increasing alertness and focus.

Adults with ADD often use music in earbuds in their workplace to improve focus and enhance task performance



MUSIC AND MOVEMENT

Drumming and dance are ancient forms of musical expression used by many cultures for millennia. Cultural rituals evolved around dance and music, especially in non-Western cultures. The vibrations from drumming positively affects the nervous system and helps with emotional regulation. Develop a ritual in your home that works for your child(ren). Explore various ways to move, sing, dance, and use musical instruments, even a tambourine or other percussive instrument available in the car after school can help a child release built up energy that exhibits as poorly regulated behavior



BEDTIME ROUTINE

Calming the nervous system down is key to a good night's rest for both children and adults. Our busy society with constant inputs of light and noise agitate the nervous system of children in the most stable environments. A traumatized child is already “wired” for vigilance.



Establishing a calming routine will improve sleep, and positively impact a child's behaviors the following day.. Music is a wonderful backdrop for creating a calming space. Choose sounds and tracks, textures and low lighting, to slow down the nervous system. Stretching movements or slow dance movements (Tai Chi accomplishes this with adults) with music that progressively reduces in volume and speed are perfect before or after a bath. Lowering lights, turning off devices, and soothing music create a space of safety while regulating the nervous system



CONCLUSION

Music has proven to be far more than a form of entertainment; it is a powerful therapeutic tool that supports children as they heal from trauma. Through rhythm, melody, and creative expression, music offers a safe way for children to process emotions that may be too complex or painful to articulate. These kinds of emotions are even difficult for adults to express in therapy while children lack the language skills to do so in the best of circumstances. Music fosters emotional regulation, bridges connections, builds resilience, and restores a sense of agency in lives disrupted by traumatic experiences.

When integrated into therapeutic and educational settings, music creates opportunities for trust and emotional growth.

Whether through listening, movement, songwriting, or performance, children are able to explore their feelings at their own pace. Music therapy strengthens social bonds, helping children feel understood and less isolated in their experiences.

As awareness of childhood trauma continues to grow, so too should the use of music as a healing resource. By embracing music as a therapeutic tool, caregivers can nurture emotional well-being and improve mental health supporting children in their recovery journey.





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