
Focus on Strengths: Helping Trauma-Exposed Children Build a Positive Sense of Self

INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the blog post, “From Trauma-Informed to Asset-Informed care in Early Childhood.” The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Recognize the limits of focusing *only* on the negative effects of trauma to support children’s development of a positive sense of self.
- ◆ Discuss the importance of recognizing and validating strengths to support trauma-exposed children to develop a positive sense of self.

Activity

- ◆ Read the blog post.
- ◆ After reading the blog post, use the questions below to guide your reflection. Specifically, consider the value of focusing on strengths to help trauma-exposed children build a more positive view of themselves.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support children’s positive sense of self.

“Focusing on trauma is the starting line, not the finish line”

Dr. Phil Fisher, University of Oregon

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ The author of the blog post argues that we need to focus and expand on what trauma-exposed children are already doing that is right. This is called a strengths-based approach.
 - In what ways do you think that a strengths-based approach can help children build a positive view of themselves?
 - Why do you think that a strengths-based approach is particularly beneficial for children exposed to trauma?

- ◆ The blog post explains that when we are too focused on the deficits of adversity, we risk stereotyping or expecting less from children. Becoming aware of our stereotypes and expectations is key to overcome them. To become aware of your stereotypes and expectations:
 - List all children in your classroom that you know (or suspect) may be experiencing some type of trauma or adversity.
 - Use these questions to do a critical self-reflection:
 - How often do you use terms like *out of control*, *aggressive*, or *disruptive* when talking about these children? How does your language shift when you talk about other children in your classroom?
 - Do you hold these children to different behavioral expectations than other children in your classroom? If so, how?
 - How often do you focus on what these children lack rather than what they bring to the classroom? How does such focus shift when you talk about other children in your classroom?

- ◆ A child's sense of self is heavily influenced by how adults, such as teachers, and peers respond to them. Using the same list of children from the prior question:
 - Write a short sentence describing the strengths for each child.
 - Plan a time to intentionally label the strengths of each child (e.g., during outdoor time for a child who is great at sports or when feeding the classroom pet for a child who loves animals).
 - For each child, build one instructional opportunity that draws on their strengths (e.g., let a child with leadership skills lead the class in a game of Simon Says).

- ◆ Follow through this plan for a week and reflect on your experience. How did children react when you label their strengths? During the instructional opportunities? How did you feel when intentionally focusing on children's strengths?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about different trauma and children's sense of self:

- ◆ **Source:** The Guardian
- ◆ **Article:** How Being Poor Can Lead to a Negative Spiral of Fear and Self-Loathing
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jun/30/poverty-negative-spiral-fear-self-loathing>
Description: Poverty conditions (e.g., household crowding, food insecurity, housing instability) make traumatic events more likely to occur. In this article, you will learn about how poverty affects children's sense of self development.

- ◆ **Source:** National Public Radio (NPR)
- ◆ **Podcast:** Positive Childhood Experiences May Buffer Against Health Effects of Adverse Ones
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/09/09/759031061/positive-childhood-experiences-may-buffer-against-health-effects-of-adverse-ones>
- ◆ **Description:** This short podcast highlights the research behind the long-term benefits of positive childhood experiences. Early positive experiences help children to develop a positive sense of self. In this podcast, you will learn about the power of intentionally providing children exposed to adversity with early positive experiences.