
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 young 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 related to children who experience trauma 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 do you describe these children? How often do you use terms like *out of control*, *aggressive*, *disruptive*, or *impossible to reach* 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?

- ◆ Young children typically begin to develop a sense of self around 18 months. Their development is heavily influenced by how adults 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 transitions a child who loves to clean up toys or during circle time an infant who smiles and bounces to the music).
 - For each child, build one instructional opportunity that draws on their strengths (e.g., follow the child's lead and imitate their movements during music and movement).

- ◆ 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 trauma and children's sense of self:

- ◆ **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.
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- ◆ **Source:** University of Nevada, Reno
 - ◆ **Article:** Avoid Labeling Your Child
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://extension.unr.edu/publication.aspx?PubID=3011>
 - ◆ **Description:** When we label children, we influence how they see themselves and how others' treat them. Written by child development specialist Dr. YaeBin Kim, this short article offers suggestions for how to limit the negative effects of labeling young children.