

Strategies for Helping Youth With Trauma

Exposure: Managing Play Re-Enactment

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Children who have been exposed to trauma may use play as a coping mechanism in order to make sense of their experiences. This can allow them to process their emotions and thoughts in a developmentally appropriate and healthy way. In fact, we know that sexualized and/or violent play is something that all children may engage in even if they do not have an identified trauma exposure. Therefore, it is important to consider how you talk with children about the play you are witnessing. Here are some guidelines to collaborate with families and provide support to children when you are concerned by your observations..

Stay Curious

Adults' interpretations of children's play can be different than what the children are really thinking. Because you see something that concerns you during play, does not mean that it is your sole responsibility to interpret what you are seeing. It is important to be curious and open and ask about the play in a non-judgmental manner. Keep the questions open-ended, allow the child to label the activities you are seeing, and allow the child to guide explanations. This can be a brief conversation that is meant to simply collect information to be discussed with families.



Partnering With Families

When children's play is concerning, it's our professional responsibility to start a conversation with that child's family in a calm and open-minded manner. For families having ongoing distress, treatment is available to help families seek safety, grow stronger, and heal. They can speak to their doctor, school counselor, spiritual leader, or call 211 to find referrals to a mental health provider.

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Asking "What's happening to your doll?" or noticing "wow, you look angry." can prompt children to explain what is going through their mind without the influence of our adult lens. Less is more in this scenario to ensure you are not providing a narrative that the child does not have.

When and How to Intervene

If the child is engaged in play that leads them to become agitated, is disruptive to other children, or is inappropriate for the setting, it's time to gently interrupt and redirect. Ensure you're not shaming or blaming the child, and simply offer another activity. Be sure to communicate these instances to families.