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TEN PLAYGROUP EXERCISES TO HELP CHILDREN EXPRESS REPRESSED EMOTIONS AND RECOVER FROM TRAUMA

These simple exercises can be taught to teachers and parents in only thirty minutes; their effect can be the difference between a return to a happy, normal childhood or more severe consequences of post-traumatic disorders.



The shock of a traumatic event like an earthquake constricts the body disturbing the autonomic nervous system and impairing normal physical and mental functioning. Irregular heartbeat, shallow breathing, diarrhea and insomnia are all examples of the effects of trauma; furthermore, emotional and mental instability may manifest through such symptoms as violent outbursts, generalized anxiety, paranoia, flashbacks or excessive crying. While these are most often temporary expressions of imbalance, it is possible to accelerate a return to normality through simple exercises and activities disguised as simple games or playtime fun.

- 1. Begin with an exercise that restores rhythm.*

Most traumas cause a manifestation of mild to extreme hysteria, either overt (screaming, shaking, tachycardia,

hyperventilation) or more latent (hypertension, adrenal exhaustion, insulin spiking, acute hormonal imbalances). To restore balance, we begin with simple clapping games, adding rhythmic stomping, marching and toning. The opposite of hysteria is rhythm; children love these fun warm-ups as their bodies quickly respond to a natural beat.

2. *Move the body through breathing and toning.*

Oxygen nourishes cells and displaces waste products in the bloodstream like carbon dioxide. Deep breathing cleanses as it invigorates. Open the chest through gradual stretching, placing the palms above the waistline behind the back and keeping the knees loose as the body arches backwards. Make sounds as the lungs expand and breathe deeply.

3. *Loosen the joints.*

The body's joints absorb shock; therefore, exercises that open the wrists, elbows and shoulders help to release tension in the upper body. This is especially useful before bedtime for children who have internalized fear causing them difficulty falling asleep. Standing in place and alternating left and right, shake the ankles and rotate them. Vibrate the knees and swirl the hips widely, again stretching these areas gently as you breathe deeply.

4. *Laugh, scream and bounce.*

All kids love to make noise, scream and laugh. Once the joints are open and the breath is deeper, bounce on the heels and make some noise – eventually encouraging them to get louder and louder. Really let it go, arms stretched above heads and hands shaking as you blow the roof off. Change this into a laugh, like “Ho!...Ho!...Ho!”, scaling your tone downward and keeping the body loose. Increase the bounce from just the heels to the whole foot, jumping of the

ground as the laughter continues, eventually encouraging them to jump and bounce as high as they can while they laugh even more forcefully and loudly.

5. *Alternate extremes to create flexibility.*

By this time, children will be quite loose and giggling, eagerly awaiting the next directive. Expand this softening of the whole body using the image of a rag doll or marionette, or the metaphor of a wet noodle. Pretend that the legs and arms have become so rubbery so as not to be able to support the torso. Do this together with silly, loud noises sticking out the tongue through loose lips and making a funny exhale sound. Then, suddenly, snap to attention and stiffen the entire body, arms taut, fists clenched and back erect. Turn to the right in a circle and begin a military-like march, together with sharp sounds like "Hup!...Hup!...Hup!...Aaooo....Hup!...Hup!...Hup!..." as if they are soldiers. Abruptly, stomp to a halt, turn back into the circle and become again like soft noodles, repeating the funny sounds and wiggling arms, legs and swaying body. After a few times, change back to a rigid stance, tighten the jaw and neck, turn the opposite direction and march in a circle in stiff cadence. 15 seconds later, return to the soft noodle game, alternating the rigid, stiff body with nearly liquid, runny limbs as the body softens.

6. *Express anger toward the leader in the center, pulling a deep guttural sound from the belly and extending it out through the arms and hands.*

Stand with legs spread open the width of the shoulders, keeping the knees soft and relaxed. Lifting the arms and hands, step forward, make a sharp shouting noise as the energy and sound leave the body and push the anger out through the fingertips and open hands. Do this to each child, having him or her repeat it back to you. Get them to make a

loud, angry sound – no little peeps do the job – to release deep tension in the belly.

7. *Make scary noises and express fear.*

Push out the sound with a loud scream, making such a scary noise and expression that the “receiver” pretends to be very frightened. Demonstrate this a few times and make pairs to practice. Show them what it looks like for you to be particularly terrified, recoiling and contracting when the screamer aims this expression at you. Respond by running away in terror, screaming yourself!

8. *Play copycat with frustration, irritation, laughter and sadness.*

All of these emotions are normal responses, and children need some modeling to show what acceptable behaviors are. Cross your arms and look at the group, letting a “Hmmp!” go in frustration. Have them copy you. Change the “Hmmp!” to “Naaa...Naaa!” as you put your hands on your hips, as if you are teasing or defying someone. Get them to do the same. Growl a bit, with a soft “Grrrrr...” as you bare your teeth; respond with a high-pitched laugh, “Hee...Hee...Hee!” and have them repeat it. Take the laugh even further, with a “Haaa...Haaaa...haaa!” using your whole body to laugh and let go. Go back and forth with laughing sounds, “EEeking” and “Whhhhooooo.....whoooo...whoo”-ing until they begin to lose control and double up in laughter. Slowly change your laughter to moaning, wailing, and crying, eventually becoming so deeply distraught that you pretend to (or actually) cry hysterically like a baby, finding a shoulder to cry on as you seek consolation. Have the other person pat your back as you tearfully break down in their arms.

9. *Join hands and harmonize, bringing the group back together as one.*

All this fun and expression needs closure and centering. Bring everyone back into a circle, holding hands where permissible and make a few soft tones together as a group.

10. *End with the cleansing breath.*

Release hands, but keep the arms outstretched by the sides, a few inches from the waist, palms facing forward. Breathe in through the nose, breathing out through the mouth, rounding the lips and blowing gently as if trying to bend the flame of a candle but not blowing it out like on a birthday cake. Repeat this breathing, in through the nose, out through the mouth at least three times. Lead them in a short visualization, guiding the energy of fear out of their bodies and chest, down the arms and out through the fingertips as they exhale. Then, guide anger out through the same path, breathing in first through the nose, and releasing tension, anger and frustration down through the arms and out through the fingertips. Finally, let sadness out in the same way with a cleansing breath. Keeping the eyes closed, lead the group in a few more breaths in silence, ending with an expression of gratitude for life's blessings, a prayer, or a few words of encouragement about the future.



With steady reassurance from parents and elders, most children will cope well with trauma and return to normal functioning after a few months. Kids need to know that they will be safe, that their lives will resume, some daily routines will be reestablished and their world will be fun again. It is our sincere wish that these simple exercises can be used to provide support in this recovery process to parents and teachers -- as well as our children and future generations.