

Simple Strategies for Intervening with Traumatized and Dysregulated Youth

January 12, 2017

Rebecca Ezechukwu, Ph.D.

Licensed Psychologist

University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center

Presenter Background

- Program Therapist, Addressing Childhood Trauma through Intervention Outreach & Networking (ACTION)
 - Division of CBH, Dept. of Psychiatry
- Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Miami University, 2014 (M.A. 2009)
- B.A. in Business Administration, Washington State University, 2006
- Worked across numerous settings
 - primary care, juvenile justice, rural and community mental health, acute children's psychiatric hospital, school-based mental health, higher education, child protective services
- No financial disclosures

Why this topic?

- More than two-thirds of youth in the US have experienced one traumatic event during childhood
- Following trauma exposure, distress ranges from short-term to long-term and can result in extreme behavioral and emotional dysregulation
 - (e.g., oppositional behavior, limit testing, yelling, aggression, overactive silliness, withdrawal, self-isolation, spacing out, shutting down/numbing).
- Youth ability to both heal from trauma and self-regulate is heavily dependent upon adult self-regulation capacities and recognition of and healthy response to youth trauma-related functioning and/or dysregulation

Why this topic?

- Trauma uniquely disrupts youth development, especially regulation abilities

Starting point of intervention: the interaction between the adult and the child

Objectives

- Participants will examine how traumatic experience(s) can disrupt the development of self-regulation in youth
- Participants will recognize common triggers for dysregulation in youth
- Participants will identify strategies to improve intervention efforts with traumatized and/or dysregulated youth

Check Your Starting Point

Which of these best describes your starting point TODAY when it comes to providing practical intervention and support to a youth

- A. I consider myself trauma-informed, and I need some new ideas
- B. I have difficulty understanding how dysregulation occurs and/or difficulty recognizing trauma-related emotions and behaviors in children.
- C. I have some intervention skills but am unsure of when to use them
- D. My own heightened response during an interaction with a youth might be problematic
- E. More than one of these

What is Self-Regulation?

- The capacity to manage experience on many levels: somatic, thoughts, feelings, behaviors
- Affect
 - Ability to understand and manage one's feelings
 - Recognize and label the emotions of others
- Behavior
 - Impulse control, delay of gratification, frustration tolerance, task persistence
- Cognition (executive function skills)
 - Working memory, focused attention, attentional shifting, planning, problem solving

What is the importance of self-regulation?

- Self-regulation is often a better predictor of a child's academic success in reading and math than IQ (Blair & Razza, 2007)
- Children with strong self-regulation abilities tend to be more socially competent than their peers, and get along better with other children and teachers (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010)
- Strong self-regulation abilities help youth (and adults) think before speaking and choose appropriate words and behaviors during conflict situations (McClelland & Tominey, 2014)
- Contributes to the ability to moderate emotions and somatic responses to stress (Malchiodi, 2015)

How Does Self-Regulation Develop?

- Caregivers* contribute to the development of healthy self-regulation over time
- Co-regulation between child and adult starting from birth
 - Individual temperament and goodness of fit
 - Physiol. organization: Sleeping & eating patterns, alert interaction, ...toileting
 - Reflection & Mirroring
 - Verbal, behavioral
 - Modeling
 - Facial expressions, verbal/nonverbal cues for emotion are paired with actions and experience
 - Caregiver actions serve as a demonstration of regulation abilities and affect tolerance
 - Stimulation & soothing
 - When caregiver is attuned, s/he helps child reach optimal levels of arousal
 - Caregiver words, vocal tones, & behaviors become a source of physiol. organization → Regulation gradually shifts from being externally structured to internally directed
- Continued use of significant others as regulation resources throughout life

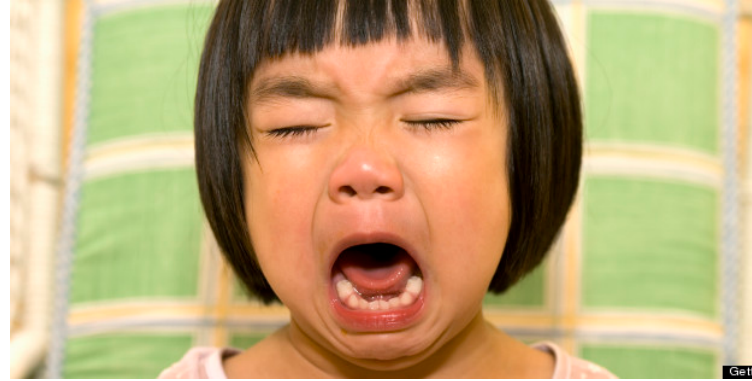
Why do youth experience dysregulation?

- In utero exposure to illicit substances, other teratogens
- Family history
 - temperament, family modeling, parental trauma/psychopathology
- Unresponsive, inconsistent, and/or abusive caregiving
- Congenital conditions, developmental delays
- Brain injuries
- Sensory defensiveness (Wilbarger & Wilbarger, 1991)

Why Do Youth Experience Dysregulation?

- Normative danger response
 - Within seconds of perceiving danger, arousal level goes up, higher cognitive processes go down
 - Fight-Flight-Freeze response
- Youth who have experienced repeated or chronic trauma may have an “overactive alarm” for danger (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010)
- False alarms go off in response to reminders or triggers
- Triggered responses can often be connected to dysregulated behaviors and emotions

Recognizing Dysregulation



- Times when the youth's emotions, behaviors, and/or energy level does not match the setting or appears under/over-controlled
- Range of dysregulation
 - Minor fidgeting, oppositional behavior, overactive silliness, yelling, aggression, withdrawal, self-isolation, spacing out, shutting down/numbing, startle response
 - Short, intermediate, and longer-term depending on cause, age, context, and resources

How Can I Help with Youth Regulation?

- Attunement (“tuning in”) is about **building relational safety**
 - Helps us to observe, validate, and put language to youth and parent experience
 - **Minimizes the threat** of getting close to others
- The more that individuals in a system are **active** in “tuning in” to each other, the less **reactive** the system will be
- Use attunement skills to
 - understand triggers, motivations, drives underlying behaviors
 - support regulation → co-regulation



Strategies to Build Attunement: Recognizing Triggers for Dysregulation

- Transition times/changes in routine, unpredictability
- Unique trauma-specific triggers
 - Dates, objects
- Praise and positive attention
- Authority
 - Consider gender, age, role, rapport
- Seeing or hearing aggressive behavior
- Limit Setting
 - Receiving consequences
 - Discipline (perceived and actual)
 - Timeout/Isolation from others
- Physical closeness to others
 - Consider gender, age, role, rapport
- Loud or abrupt noises
 - Bells, loudspeaker, fire alarm, doors and lockers slamming, outside noise (e.g., sirens), loud voices
- Too much stimulation from environment/sensory overload
- Low stimulation
 - Quiet, darkness, eyes closed
- Crowds
- Posters, images or signs
- Perceived lack of choices or control
- School assignments focused on sharing personal experiences

Strategies to Build Attunement: Learning Youth Language

- What does the youth look like when regulated? When dysregulated?
 - Consider facial expression, body posture, quality and amount of speech, tone of voice, soothability, withdrawal, clinginess, affect
 - Remain **curious** about changes in behavior
- What happened before the dysregulation occurred?
 - Consider transition times during the day, specific settings and conditions, various sensory stimuli (smells, sounds), communication style/relational interactions
- Possible function of the behavior?
 - Ex. Oppositional behavior → attempts to cope with anticipated rejection OR triggered response to past experiences of coercive control
 - Ex. Self-injury → attempt at self-soothing OR coping with numbness



Strategies to Recognize and Respond to Triggered Dysregulation

- **FIGHT** – might look like verbal escalation or physical agitation, hyperactivity, oppositionality, demanding, hostile
 - **Respond with:** Reflective statements, nonverbal listening skills, less questions
- **FLIGHT** – might look like scared, panicky, have difficulty catching breath, wants to leave or avoid situation
 - **Respond with:** breathing skills, grounding skills, give reassurance and simple information
- **FREEZE** – might look watchful and quiet, or spacey, dazed, forgetful, or emotionally shut down
 - **Respond with:** grounding skills, breathing skills

Strategies to Handle De-Escalation

- Communicate using simple, direct sentences
- Use reflective listening & speak in a calm, even tone
- Reassure youth and focus on positive goal (not punishment)
 - Distract and redirect when able
- Show open, accepting body language
- Limit the number of adults involved
- Allow for physical space and escape route
- Designate spaces outside of regular setting for de-escalation
 - Quiet space to sit in (supervised)
 - Seek support – particular staff may be better for certain youth
 - Release energy (walk, gym, track, yell, weighted vest, mats)



Grounding strategies

- Mini-timeline
 - 5 things that happened today
 - 1 strange thing someone told you
- Change your hairstyle
 - Pull your hair up and hold it with your hand for 45-60 seconds. Notice the tingles in your scalp,
 - Hair brushing

Grounding Exercise

Name 3 things



you see



you smell



you hear



you feel

Breathe in and out slowly 3x

Self-Strategies to Support Youth Regulation

- Empathy, mindfulness, compassion, forgiveness
 - Depersonalize, Remember your WHY
 - Remind yourself that even the most disruptive or confusing behaviors can be driven by anxiety or unmet needs (and can be temporary),
- Anticipate difficult times for yourself AND/OR for youth & families and seek/provide additional support
 - (e.g., anniversaries of traumatic events/losses, holidays)
- Pay attention to your own triggers for stress
- Model healthy regulation strategies, including self-care
 - Do you have a wellness/self-care plan that you can add to?

Strategies for Healthy Self-Regulation

1. **Advance preparation**: something you do ***before*** entering the situation
 - (e.g., relaxation, mental rehearsal, seeking support)
2. **“In-the-pocket” strategies**: something you do ***in*** the situation
 - (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation, mantra)
3. **“Recovery” strategies**: something you do ***after*** the situation
 - (e.g., reaching out, taking down time, enjoyable activities)
4. **Ongoing self-care**: something you do purposefully to increase well-being and decrease stress
 - (e.g., engaging in arousal-regulating activities like yoga or sports, built-in “me” time)

(Four Levels of Self-Care; Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010)

Strategies to Improve Routines and Transitions

- Provide targeted reinforcement when establishing routines
- Prepare youth in advance for changes in routines (McClelland & Tominey, 2014)
 - Starting a new activity
 - Going on an outing
 - Visiting a new place
 - Meeting a new person
- Explain what you are going to do and why
- Structure transitions & provide limits around activities
 - Ex. “In 10min, we clean up, in 5min we clean up, It’s now time to clean up.”

Affective (Emotional) Strategies

- Help children recognize emotional (dys)regulation
 - Consider situation, somatic responses, thoughts, specific triggers
 - Use “shortcuts” and “code words”
- Name the feeling(s). Normalize feelings.
- Build a vocabulary for emotional experience
 - Daily check-ins, high/low
 - Reflect observable affect and behavior
 - Connect emotions to context, body
- Model your own use of healthy regulation skills
 - Calm, even tone, supportive (validating) language
 - Deep breaths, grounding (e.g., I Spy), movement, emotion charades

I think a lot of kids would feel worried in that situation.

How are you feeling today?

It sounds like you're not sure what you're feeling. It looks like you might be in the Blue Zone because your head is down and you haven't said much today.

You are crying. You seem worried about something

Behavioral Strategies

- Provide targeted reinforcement when establishing routines
- Set and maintain clear expectations and limits
 - Use positive reinforcement and logical consequences
 - Consider communicating in verbal, nonverbal, written, visual ways to maximize learning
- Model completing tasks even when they are boring or not fun (e.g., cleaning, paperwork)
- Make clear requests
 - Ex. “Clean up!” vs. “Put away the crayons, then pick up the dinosaurs. Then push the chairs in to the table.”



Behavioral Strategies: Ways to Praise

Opposition/anger	You're doing so well at being patient. I like that you used (<i>skill used</i>) to calm yourself down. I'm proud of you for using your words. I'm so proud of you for cooperating. Nice job using your indoor voice to tell me that.
Hyperactivity/Destructiveness/ Carelessness	I like the way you are being gentle with that _____. That's awesome how you're asking so politely. That's a good indoor/quiet voice you're using. Way to keep your hands to yourself! Excellent job sitting in your seat.
Inattention	Excellent job concentrating. Great work following directions. I can tell you're listening, great job! You're doing so well taking your time.
Attention-seeking/interrupting	Thank you for waiting patiently. I like the way you're taking turns. Thanks for letting me finish what I was doing first. Excellent job staying in your seat.

Trauma Considerations with Limit Setting

- Limit setting and consequences can trigger increased dysregulation
 - Fears of punishment, authority, and vulnerability
 - Fears of abandonment and rejection (use of time-out and ignoring)
- Minimize impact of possible retriggering of youth
 - Make adaptations to limits for specific triggers
 - Name reason for limit and link to behavior
 - Name boundary around the limit
 - length of time in timeout
 - length of time privilege is lost
 - Move on



Trauma Considerations with Limit Setting

- Avoid power struggles by providing a limited choice
- Use attunement skills to determine reason for noncompliance (overwhelmed by task/instructions? OR pure refusal?)
 - Name the feeling or behavior you are seeing, consider breaking task up into smaller ones, offer to help.
- Choose your moments
- Compromise
- Apply limits after youth has calmed down
 - Remember to self-attune to manage own affect

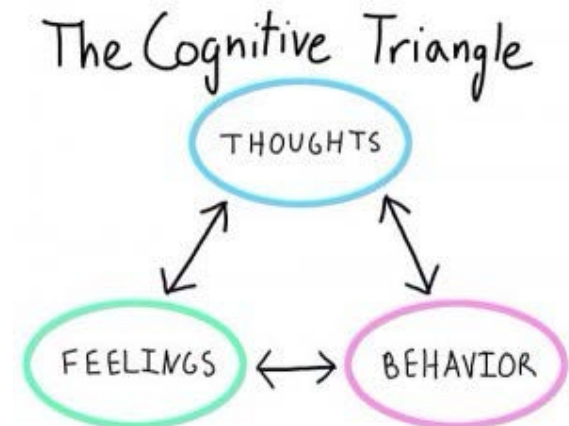


Executive Functions Strategies

- Model waiting for a turn
 - (e.g., waiting to wash hands after child finishes, waiting in line)
- Games generalize self-regulation (McClelland & Tominey, 2014)
 - Requires attention, remembering rules, exhibiting self-control before acting
 - Simon Says, Red Light Green Light
- Recognize “choice” situations
 - Anticipated problem or upcoming challenge
 - A situation that already occurred
- Notice and name choices and related outcomes; reinforce positive choices

Cognitive Strategies

- Connect negative thoughts to dysregulated emotions and behaviors
- Identify “Thinking Traps”
 - Mind reading, future-telling, labeling, thinking the worst, all/nothing, shoulds
- Challenging thinking traps
 - Identifying true or helpful?
 - What might make me feel better (e.g., less angry, sad, scared & calmer, more relaxed)
 - What would you say to a best friend? Are you in wise mind?
 - Behaviors that are not consistent with my assumptions



Strategies to Support Resilience & Self-Efficacy

- Development of a positive sense of self
 - Choice and voice, hobbies/activities
- Development of more planful and regular use of skills (PRACTICE)
 - Consider age/emotional level/EF skills
 - Help other caregivers effectively cue youth to use skills
- Introduce youth to tools and resources that they can use after their encounter(s) with you, in multiple settings
 - Apps: *Stop, Breathe, & Think*. *Virtual Hope Box*



Talking & Listening Strategies

- Conduct conversations in private
- Be aware of other children and adults, respect the child's privacy
- Tell the youth what you hear them saying. Reflect it back. Try to repeat the child's words
- Clarify the child's terms if you don't understand
 - Ex. "What do you mean?"
- Show youth you are listening
 - Eye contact, nod head, watch interruptions and conversation takeovers

(UMDNJ-SOM CARES, 2004)

Talking & Listening Strategies

- Things kids heard that helped
 - “I’m ready to listen when you’re ready to talk.”
 - "I can't know how you feel, but I want to help you in any way that I can."
 - It's OK to cry."
- Things kids heard that ***did not*** help
 - “I know how you feel.”
 - “It's been four months now, you should be over it.”
 - “You'll get over it in time. Just try not to think about it.”
 - “You shouldn't be this angry. Being angry won't bring your father back.”

Movement Strategies to Support Regulation

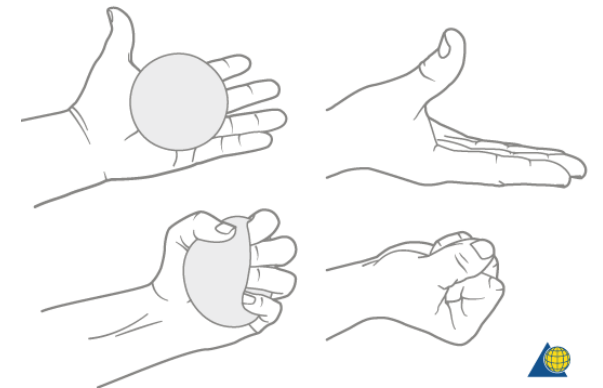
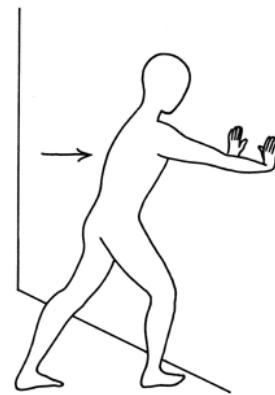
RAISE ENERGY, FOCUS, ATTENTION

- Red-Light Green-Light
- Musical Chairs
- Mini Dance Parties
- Chair Pushups
- Sitting on tactile cushion
- Head, shoulders, knees & toes

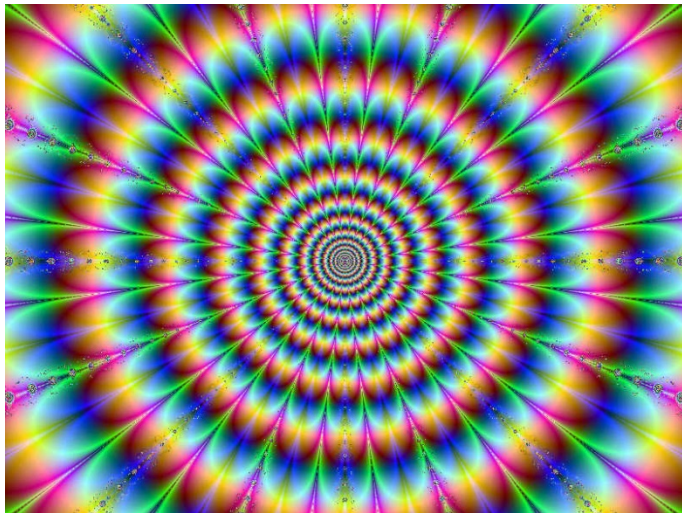


DECREASE ENERGY, SOOTHE/CALM

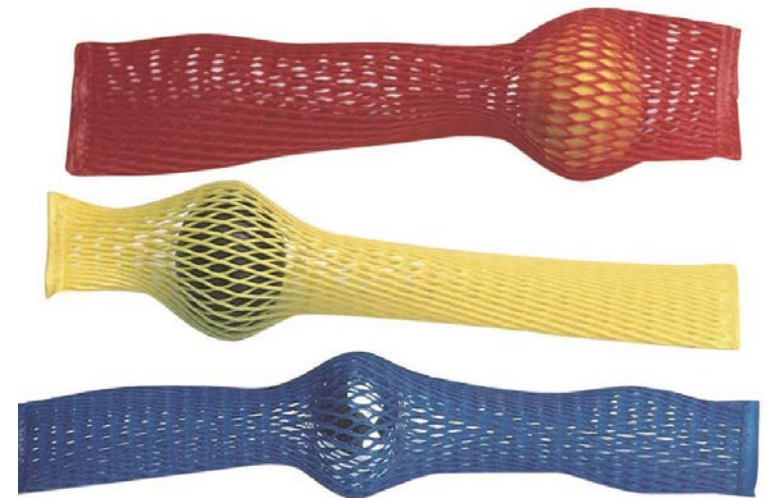
- Squeeze and releases (stress balls, self-hugs, robot/ragdoll)
- Slow-motion activities
- Write with opposite hand
- Coloring
- Rubbing soft fabric



Fidget Toys, Coping Boxes, Sensory Box

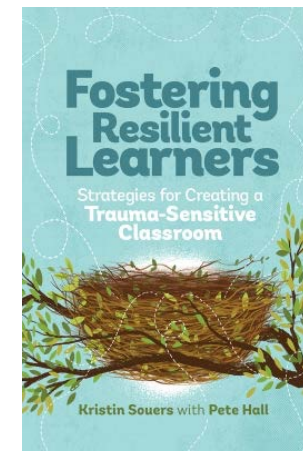


R. Ezechukwu, 2017, UNM



Questions, Feedback, Resources

- Rebecca Ezechukwu rezechukwu@salud.unm.edu
- <http://psychiatry.unm.edu/centers/crcbh/action/>
 - ACTION Clinic
- <http://www.nctsn.org/>
 - National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall



Selected References

- Blaustein, M.E., & Kinniburgh, K.M. (2010). *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- McClelland M. M., & Tominey, S.L. (2014). The development of self-regulation and executive function in young children. *Zero to Three Journal*, 35(2), 2-8.