

Relational EXCHANGE

Sharing trauma
informed practice
ideas and strategies
for the ACT's
early childhood
educators

Tricky transitions

Welcome

Welcome to our next blog piece for 2021, relating to trauma-informed practice for the ACT's early childhood education and care (ECEC) community.

These pieces will provide links to practice and questions for discussion that you might find useful in your work – particularly when reflecting on supporting and educating children who have experienced trauma, and their families.

Why Relational Exchange?

We have called this blog 'Relational Exchange' for two reasons. Firstly, because this reflects the importance of connection through relationship that underpins both child development and repair or healing from the impacts of trauma. The nature or quality of the relational exchanges we engage with children and their families are critical. And every relational exchange provides an opportunity for understanding and an opportunity for repair.

Secondly, because this can provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas amongst early childhood educators and other professionals. The topics explored here and the discussion questions presented will provide you with opportunities for reflection and exploration across your team, your site or centre, your networks and the broader communities of practice.

Supporting and managing tricky transitions

We know as adults that change can be truly challenging. Dealing with those transitions from one situation to another can leave us feeling wobbly and struggling to find a solid platform to manage that change. We are often experiencing a mix of feelings that, even when the change is something we want, always include a sense of loss and anxiety at what is to come.

Transitions are tricky for us all but can be terrifying for children who have experienced trauma. We know that for children who have experienced trauma any change at all can feel threatening. Anything that is unpredictable, new or surprising (including happy surprises) can tip a traumatized child's physiology into defensive mode – which is preparing them to fight, run away, freeze or collapse to deal with this invisible 'predator'.

What we want for all children is for them to be able to play, learn and enjoy being with other children and adult. But, as Porges' Polyvagal Theory tells us, we can only play, learn and have fun with others when our nervous system detects that all is safe. As we continue to reinforce, our job when working with young children is largely to help them feel safe.

Predictability as safety

The notion of predictability as safety is a helpful one. It then asks us to think about what we can do to ensure that a child's day with us is predictable enough for them to be able to play, learn and engage with us. How can we do that?

We can think about the comings and goings at the start and end of each day. We know that this move from one environment to another and back again can be a very challenging transition for children who have experienced trauma. One way to do this is to think about having a primary caregiver in the centre or service who is always in the same place when the child arrives. That person stays with the child as they 'warm up' to the day and move to connect with the other children. There is a negotiated greeting, and goodbye, 'script' that is consistent, so the child comes to expect and then experience it. As noted here, there is a goodbye script as well and the child may need that consistent adult to give them some 'warm down' time at the end of the day too before they head home.

Another example of a strategy to support this entry to each day is to build a sensory based activity into the daily welcome. Examples might include having a consistent piece of music in the room, a textured item that the child is passed as they enter the room, a series of images that may be projected onto a wall during that entry period (that might perhaps be landscapes or patterns) or a smell that is distributed through the room or centre. This last one sounds peculiar but can be helpful but is certainly specific to the parameters of the centre or service. One example might be to have bread baking each morning that is then shared later in the day but another, less involved, example might be a diffuser that distributes a smell that is tolerated by all of the children, and

staff. The purpose of all of these is that this is something the child experiences every day and builds that sense of safety from predictability that enables a smoother transition into the centre.

One example of a sensory activity that has been shared by educators is a child who would run his hands back and forth in shaving cream at his table, with his familiar staff member next to him, for up to 20 minutes each morning until he felt safe enough and regulated enough to engage with the rest of the session.

We also need to think about changes that we make and consider how that might be experienced by the child who is already on alert and struggling to feel safe. For example, we might like to move the furniture in the room around during the holidays 'for a change'. However, it is important to think about how this might feel for a child who has experienced trauma when they return after the holidays and find that the home corner is no longer where it used to be. This doesn't say we don't change the room around but it does suggest it can be helpful for the children to be involved in the decision making and also involved in the moving process over a period of time to give them a chance to manage this transition.

It is worth thinking about all the transitions that occur during each and every day. Transitions include inside time to outside time, play time to mat time, mat time to table time, being awake to going to sleep, waking up from a sleep, eating time to non-eating time – and on it goes. How can we manage each of these transitions during the day to try to minimize behavioural disruptions and ensure the children feel safe throughout the day? We might all sing a song to make the move from inside to outside and vice versa. On centre uses a laminated photo of each child that the child plants into a pot of sand when they make the move inside.

If we think about how many transitions occur during any one day it is surprising how many there are. This can represent the number of times a day that a child might feel unsafe and we can see that reflected in the child's behaviour and responses to the environment. If we can build predictability we can build safety.

Where to from here?

In reviewing the information in this blog article you might like to reflect on – or discuss with your colleagues – your responses to the following questions:

- How many transitions can we identify during each day in our room or centre?
- What have we seen in terms of children struggling with transitions? What do we already do to support these children at these times?
- What else could we do as a team to support children through tricky transitions? What do we need to enable those responses?

- What can we do as a staff team to look after ourselves in some of our own key transitions?
- How else does this information link to the children with whom we work?