

# The Power of Play for Addressing Trauma in the Early Years

Almost half (47%) of children age 0–5 in the United States have experienced one or more types of serious trauma.<sup>1</sup> Trauma can be defined as *an actual or perceived danger that undermines a child’s sense of physical or emotional safety or poses a threat to the safety of the child’s parents or caregivers, overwhelms their coping ability, and affects their functioning and development.*

**Young children—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers—affected by trauma often feel unsafe and too frightened to play.** And when they do play, there is often little sense of joy, adventure, discovery, or imagination and they may repeat the story of their traumatic experiences in their play.

Trauma-informed programs reduce children’s feelings of stress and overwhelm through consistent, attuned, and caring relationships and environments that reinforce messages of safety. **Adults can create trauma-responsive environments that use the power of play** to support children to cope, build resilience, and heal from trauma.

**Children use play to help them cope with and heal from the most emotionally impactful events in their lives.** Children are very good at choosing content to include in their play that helps them work through fears they are struggling with internally. A child whose family lost their home in a fire might pretend to be a firefighter who rescues others from burning buildings and brings them to safety. Or a child whose parent died from cancer may repeat cycles of search and reunion play in which a baby lion is looking for her mother in the forest and can’t find her.

**For many young children, reenacting their worries in play is helpful** as the surprise and fear of the traumatic experience becomes familiar and predictable and, therefore, under their control. However, sometimes children’s play feels “stuck” and they need support to change the endings to their traumatic play stories. When a young child is replaying a recent experience of falling off her bike and breaking her arm over and over in her play, a caring adult can guide her to be the heroine of her story reminding her that she was strong and brave at the doctor’s office. A caring adult can also guide her to shift away from pretend play that may be distressing into more structured and/or sensory-based play (e.g., water or sand).



<sup>1</sup> Bethell, C., Davis, M., Gombojav, N., Stumbo, S., & Powers, K. (2017). *Issue brief: A national and across state profile on adverse childhood experiences among children and possibilities to heal and thrive.* Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Retrieved from [https://www.cahmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/aces\\_brief\\_final.pdf](https://www.cahmi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/aces_brief_final.pdf)



## Use the Power of Play to Build Resilience and Support Healing. Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers Can:

**Create opportunities for young children to communicate their fears and express their big feelings in constructive ways** through pretend play, expressive arts (drawing, painting), and outdoor play and by reading storybooks that help them see aspects of their life experiences acknowledged and that include characters who model how to cope and solve problems.

**Provide children with the option to engage in structured play** (pegboards, puzzles) and **sensory play** (water, sand, clay, playdough) because these activities do not require children to communicate or interact with others and provide a less threatening entry into play.

**Engage children in repetitive rhythmic movements**, including singing, dancing, walking, swinging, trampoline work, drumming, musical activities, yoga, tai chi, meditation, and deep breathing, which are all calming activities for children.

**Support children to release the extra energy charge that accumulates in their bodies after a stressful or traumatic experience.** Children who live with high levels of stress need opportunities to engage in large motor activities. Encourage children to run, climb, jump, stretch, swing, ride a tricycle, or otherwise engage in big body play to allow them to release the energy in their bodies resulting from the activation of stress chemicals and reduce the long-term impact of trauma on their vulnerable brains and bodies.

## Provide children with opportunities to engage in self-directed and adult-child collaborative play on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>

Because trauma creates feelings of helplessness and overwhelm for young children, having opportunities to make choices in play builds their resilience by allowing them to regain a sense of control. Adults can collaborate in comforting pretend play scenarios (e.g., a loving cat taking care of baby kittens) or introduce props that support children to feel powerful—a plastic plate becomes a steering wheel, or a scarf is a magical set of wings.

**Teach infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children social-emotional skills through play.** Children affected by trauma need adults to help them learn social-emotional skills. Developing awareness of the sensations in their bodies, naming and managing strong emotions, expressing what they want and need, making choices, problem-solving, and improving friendship skills help children manage the stress they face on a daily basis and build resilience.

**In some cases, young children may need additional support from an early childhood mental health (ECMH) professional** who can partner with staff and families to provide specialized therapeutic intervention. See [earlychildhoodfunders.org/play.html](http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org/play.html) for more information on ECMH.



<sup>2</sup> Nicholson, Julie. 2019. *Play, It's the Way Young Child Learn*. Early Childhood Funders. <http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org/pdf/ECF-Play-Brief.pdf>

*This brief was written by Julie Nicholson, Professor of Practice at Mills College, based on a longer version of a play pamphlet produced by the Bay Area Early Childhood Funders. Some content comes from the California Department of Education-Early Learning and Care Division's The Powerful Role of Play in Education (2020) and Responsive Early Education for Young Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness (2020). Amy Reff copyedited and designed the brief. For more information about the funders see [www.earlychildhoodfunders.org](http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org).*