

People will forget what you said, People will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel (Maya Angelou)

Strategies for supporting children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma to identify, label, express, and regulate their feelings

Dr Karen Treisman

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Introduction:

Children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma often struggle with a range of feeling-related difficulties. They often have not fully developed the key skills and competencies needed for identifying, labelling, expressing, regulating, and managing their full repertoire of emotions. Therefore, we can often see these difficulties spilling out through difficulties in emotion regulation and through a range of troubling behaviours (See chapters 1, 2, and 3 in “*Working with children and adolescents who have experienced relational and developmental trauma*” for more explanation and discussion on the foundations of emotional regulation and the impact of relational and developmental trauma.

Thus, in order to address some of the aforementioned pockets of difficulties; interventions and interactions ideally will focus on supporting children and caregivers to be able to recognise, name, express, label, and regulate their feelings; as opposed to getting lost in a sea of emotions and their associated overwhelming waves. Through strengthening children/caregivers ability to develop richer ways of describing emotion and modulating the duration, rhythm, and intensity of them, it is hoped that this will have a plethora of positive effects; including widening their window of arousal tolerance, and guiding children out of their limbic system, and back into their thinking brain.

Furthermore, this aims to increase the child’s experience of meaningfully-connected-interactions, to fill their emotional tank and treasure chest up with new re-appraising positive experiences, and to rebalance the negative-tipping scale. These strategies

support children to learn that their feelings can be safe, and builds on the premise that the more we support children to have words to express themselves and to make sense of their experiences, the less likely they are to come out through tricky behaviours. These feelings foundations often need to be laid before the more complex talking and sense-making therapies can begin, children need to learn to crawl before they can run!

The following strategies offer the reader some practical creative and multi-sensory “feelings work” ideas to use with children either directly or indirectly via their key adults. These are not prescriptive or exhaustive, and should be interwoven with other existing tools. Their suitability and appropriateness need to be carefully considered; whilst tailoring them for the unique child, provider, and context. It is also acknowledged that these ideas form a slither of one block of the feelings foundations; and some of the other blocks should be buffered through rich moment-to-moment relational interactions, an overarching embodiment of an emotionally-aware relationship/environment, and/or through emotional literacy programs such as Alert program, Roots of Empathy, SNAP, and Early HeartSmarts.

Practical strategies:

Role models and everyday naming of feelings:

Children learn how to self-soothe, recognise, and manage their feelings through the people surrounding them. Therefore, the “thinking” adults play a pivotal role in verbally and nonverbally modelling, coaching, and scaffolding how to identify, express, and respond to high-intensity arousal and a range of feelings. They should endeavour, where appropriate, to openly name the feelings in the child, themselves, and in others. For example, *how do we respond when a child’s favourite toy breaks, or in a frustrating situation (e.g. traffic) or when managing difficult feelings (bad day at work)? How openly are feelings named and acknowledged?* Everyday opportunities should be used to identify and discuss feelings. This might be in day-to-day interactions, on the TV, in a book/song/comic strip, or when playing. For example, “Wow Peppa pig has a big smile on her face she looks so excited” or “Lizzie the lizard is feeling sick, what shall we do to make her feel better?” or “If I was in your shoes, I might feel...”, or “Why do you think the rabbit is looking sad?”. Keeping in mind that children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma tend to mind-read more or misinterpret emotional cues, it can be helpful to visually show the thinking and/or regulating process, such as taking a purposeful deep breath-in, actively shaking-out the tension, putting a finger to one’s forehead, commenting on the thinking cogs moving, or the thinking clock-ticking. Children should also have desired skills such as showing kindness and empathy modelled (e.g. showing concern when a neighbour is unwell; volunteering at a soup kitchen, or offering an elderly person a seat on the train). These qualities are positively linked to prosocial tendencies (Masten et al., 2011).

Self-reflection and self-care:

When working/living with children who have experienced complex trauma, it is inevitable that a range of strong feelings will be evoked. Sometimes the child's feelings are so overwhelming and unbearable; that they are projected and pushed into those around them. Those around the child can become the containers of difficult feelings which can lead to a variety of consequences and tricky dynamics. Therefore, it is important to reflect and be aware of our own emotional reactions, triggers, and hotspots; and to practice self-care and self-reflection (See chapters 6 and 8 in "Working with children and adolescents who have experienced relational and development trauma").

Getting to know the whole child:

The more you really get to know a child, the more you can support them in identifying and learning about themselves and their feeling states (Even more so in a new placement). Similarly to a mother who learns to decode and decipher the different types of her baby's cries and signals. For example, *what makes them feel scared/happy/angry and how do they communicate this fear through their body, face, words, or behaviours?* This can be increasingly difficult with children who have experienced complex trauma as they often have their protective guard dogs and trauma jacket on, so we need to look underneath the surface to see the hidden child and to hear their unexpressed needs. This crystallises the significance of looking beyond words, and attending to our own and others unspoken communication, affect, and body language.

Creative, and playful ways to expand on children's understanding and emotion expression:

1. Making *biscuits or pizzas* with different facial expressions on them.
2. Making a *feelings of the day board* or a *feelings dictionary* such as E is for embarrassed.
3. Taking *feeling photographs* or using magazines to make their own *feelings collage/ scrapbook* e.g. of positive body language or sad faces.
4. *Face painting* or *designing masks, plates, balloons, playdough mats, or puppets* with different facial expressions.
5. Making a *quiz* or using *sentence-completion tasks* with questions like, "Think of a time when you felt ...", "I'm happiest when.." or "What is a feeling with 3 letters?"
6. Making a *feelings container* (bag, box, or jar) filled with *feelings cards*. Subsequently taking turns to pick a card to- *describe it, act it out, or draw it*.
7. Getting children to practice *faces in the mirror* or *play follow the leader with facial expressions*.
8. Drawing a *blank head with speech marks* where the child can label different thoughts and feelings, or an even more interactive of doing this exercise is by using a *sculpture of a head or a swimming hat* to physically label the different feelings.

9. Making a *poster of all of the different types of feelings* and let the child put *stickers, buttons, or pebbles* by which ones they feel, as to what extent they feel them.
10. Making feelings *jewellery and badges* using different beads and decoration.
11. For those who are more *physical*, they can *run* to different places in the room representing different feelings, design a *feelings obstacles course*, *throw* sticky hands at a *feelings board*, *throw* balls into feelings buckets, *choreograph a feelings dance*, *drum* different *feeling rhythms*, write different feelings on the *spots in a game of twister*, or make a *feelings hopscotch*.

These ideas can be used as standalone activities, or usefully interwoven into the child's daily world. For example, when they tell you a story where they felt excited, you can connect it to their *feelings dictionary* or a *feelings face*. *Journaling, art, music, magazines, film, and dance* can be useful adaptations with older children. Complementing these ideas, there are amazing resources available which enhance and stimulate playful ways of talking about feelings; such as *feeling flashcards, balls, dolls, books, monsters, magnets, games (online and board), and stamps*.

All feelings are accepted:

Show the child emotionally, cognitively, and physically that it is normal and safe to experience a range of feelings, and that these can be tolerated, bared witness to, and accepted in a containing way. This includes highlighting the difference between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; as well as the usefulness of an emotion, such as how anger can help one fight for what they believe in, or for protection.

It can be very exposing for children to share their feelings; especially if they have not had positive experiences of doing this previously, so it is important to validate how difficult this can be, and to actively show that you are pleased that they came to / trusted you. Try to really listen and hear, and avoid telling them how they should feel- their feeling is their feeling, and they are entitled to feel it. *Put yourself in their shoes, how does it feel when someone tells you how you should feel, or dismisses how you are feeling?*

Mixed feelings:

The child should be supported in noticing the experience of having mixed feelings. This is particularly significant for children who may have coped by separating/ splitting/oscillating feelings; or been immersed in all-or-nothing, black-or-white ways of thinking. This can be through verbal statements such as, "I can imagine you are very excited for starting school, but also a bit worried about...", and through practical activities which explore blended feelings. Such as designing/drawing children's feelings rainbow, bag, puzzle, pie, or patchwork, or through mixing paints, playing with string, cooking with various ingredients, making a kaleidoscope, designing inside/outside masks, or using layers of coloured sand. Where appropriate, the above ideas can be extended to talking about different parts of one's identity.

Practicing:

Role-playing scenarios/skills such as “Making new friends” or “Asking for help” through using puppets, masks, or dolls can be helpful. These can be incorporated into games like Charades or Pictionary, or explored through writing a story, poem, rap, or comic strip about the scenario.

Externalising and metaphors:

Children should be supported in getting a stronger sense of what a feeling state is (Name it to tame it). For example, children might like to name, describe, or externalise the feeling. Such as for worry, likening it to a worry worm, a worry cloud, jiggling jelly, or a spinning wheel; or anger, as a volcano, wave, tornado, lightning, or bubbling water. This can lead to child-friendly conversations around how you can cool the volcano down, not let water bubble over, surf the angry wave, or calm the whirling tornado down. Child-friendly weather or colour terms can also be useful, such as thunder or red for anger, and sun and yellow for happiness. Others may benefit from talking about different feelings in a sensory way. For example, using sandpaper for sad times, a rock for hard times, and fluffy material for calming times.

Body links:

Where possible support the child in making links between their feelings and their bodily sensations. This is especially important given the relationship between trauma and the body (See chapter 3 in “Working with children and adolescents who have experienced relational and development trauma”). For example, “I wonder if you are feeling butterflies in your tummy”, “I have noticed that your hands are tensing and you’re breathing fast”, or “Sometimes when I’m scared, my heart beats like a runaway train”. Some children might want to make a visual representation (Draw, sculpt, write) of these feelings. For example, cut-out or draw the butterflies, and write a worry on each one, and let them fly away. Others might find body-mapping exercises helpful (Chapter 3).

Monitoring arousal levels:

Adults need to be vigilant and responsive to the child’s arousal level- both when they are under or over-aroused; and support them in increasing their awareness and monitoring of these processes. This can be through using scales and metaphors, such as a “feelings thermometer, volcano, engine, ladder”, “a traffic-light system” or “a pot of bubbling feelings”. The child can then be supported in learning how to recognise these patterns, to chart where on the scale they are/were, how intense the feeling was (Big, small, medium), what helped bring them to a different feeling state, and what being in a different feeling state felt like. Day-to-day examples can help bring these to life, such as down-regulating at bedtime. Adults may need to be the child’s memory bank, and support them in creating links and consequential thinking between events, behaviours, and feelings e.g. “Do you remember when ...”, or “When you felt... then...”, or “What would happen if...”. Using the head-heart-hand concept can be a child-friendly way of discussing these connections; as can be physically making a paper-chain or playing dominos. Once children are more aware of what is happening and what feelings they are experiencing, particularly in times of

emotionally-charged situations, grounding and coping strategies can be introduced. Regulation skills should be practised and evaluated within a safe relationship; and then transformed into a plan (Coping card, hand of options, or a choice wheel) to maintain the child's arousal-equilibrium, and to reduce the intensity and duration of future dysregulation. These might include relaxation exercises, a sensory box, safe place imagery, verbal affirmations, scent/smell box, and distraction techniques.

Author Bio- Dr Karen Treisman:

Dr Karen Treisman is a Highly Specialist Clinical Psychologist who has worked in the NHS and children's services for several years. Karen has also worked cross-culturally in both Africa and Asia with groups ranging from former child soldiers to survivors of the Rwandan Genocide. Karen has extensive experience in the areas of trauma, parenting, and attachment, and works clinically using a range of therapeutic approaches with families, systems, and children in or on the edge of care, unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, and adopted children.

In addition to holding a doctorate in Clinical psychology, Karen has undergone a range of specialist trainings including in EMDR, Narrative Therapy, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Sensory Attachment Intervention, and Theraplay.

Karen has previously worked in several Looked after Children (LAC) and fostering services, and within the National Implementation Service for evidence-based interventions for Looked after children, children on the edge of care, and children in custody at the Michael Rutter Centre in the Maudsley Hospital. Karen currently works as a Clinical Lead for a court assessment and intensive parenting intervention team for children on the edge of care and in proceedings within Islington. Karen is also the director of Safe Hands and Thinking Minds training and consultancy services.

Karen is an external consultant, trainer, and assessor to Barnardos Adoption Service, PAC-UK, Hope for families, and the Fostering Network; and a member of the CoramBAAF health group advisory committee, and a reviewer for the Journal of adoption and fostering.

Karen regularly presents at local, national, and international trauma, parenting, and attachment conferences.

Book details:

Karen's book titled "Working with children and adolescents who have experienced relational and developmental trauma" is published by Routledge and is currently available for pre-order on amazon, Waterstones, and Foyles. It is officially released in October 2016. Follow www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk or Dr Karen Treisman on Twitter for regular updates.

Dr Karen Treisman, Clinical Psychologist

