

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

**Half of the world's 2 billion children have experienced one or more types of serious trauma** (Hillis et al., 2016; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). 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.** When they do play, they often experience little sense of joy, adventure, discovery, or imagination.

**Yet play can be a powerful tool for helping children cope with and heal from trauma. Adults can tap into the power of play within trauma-informed environments to help children build resilience, and support their coping and healing.** Trauma-informed environments reduce children's feelings of stress and being overwhelmed by providing consistent, caring relationships and environments that reinforce messages of safety.

Children are very good at choosing content to include in their play that helps them work through fears. A child whose family lost their home in an earthquake might pretend to be a helper who rescues others from fallen buildings and brings them to safety. Or a child who lost loved ones because of war, famine, or disease may repeat cycles of search and reunion play in which a baby animal is looking for her mother in the forest and cannot find her.

**Many young children find it helpful to reenact their worries in play, 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 may need support to *change the endings to their traumatic play stories.* When a young child is replaying a recent experience of being injured over and over in his play, a caring adult can guide him to be the hero of his story by reminding him that he is strong and brave. A caring adult also can guide a child to *shift away from pretend play that may be distressing into more structured play and play that uses the senses* (such as outside play).



*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 and adapted by **Sarah Nadiv**, Director of the Center for Trauma and Resilience, Childhood Education International. 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)*.*

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# 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, dancing), 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** (sand, clay, playdough, nature), 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, jumping rope, drumming, musical activities, stretching, meditation, and deep breathing, which are all calming activities for children.

**Support children in releasing 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, 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.

**Facilitate opportunities for children to engage in self-directed and adult-child collaborative play on a daily basis** (Nicholson, 2019). Because trauma creates feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed 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 help children feel powerful (e.g., a plastic plate becomes a steering wheel, or a scarf is a 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, solving problems, and improving friendship skills all help children manage the stress they face on a daily basis and build resilience.

## References

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- Nicholson, J. (2019). *Play, it's the way young children learn*. Early Childhood Funders. <http://www.earlychildhoodfunders.org/pdf/ECF-Play-Brief.pdf>
- Stoltenborgh, M., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Alink, L. R., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2015). The prevalence of child maltreatment across the globe: Review of a series of meta-analyses. *Child Abuse Review*, *24*(1), 37-50.