



Practical strategies to increase resilience in young children from refugee backgrounds

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A recent study conducted in Queensland found that refugee families experienced limited participation in early childhood services, with reasons for exclusion being poverty, limited language rights, systemic racism, cultural divergence between home and early childhood settings, and trauma (Lamb, 2020). This article focuses on understanding trauma and its impacts on young children and increasing utilisation of sensorimotor experiences to promote resilience and inclusion for children from refugee backgrounds in early childhood settings.

Traumatic experiences are events that threaten the physical integrity of a child, or people close to them, through harm, injury, or death (Tobin, 2016). Complex or chronic trauma occurs in children who have been exposed to one or multiple events such as war, refugee experience, physical or sexual abuse, chronic and severe neglect, exposure to domestic violence, intensive and painful medical conditions, or a single catastrophic event such as a car accident, fire, or flood.

Young children who have suffered trauma almost universally show signs of dissociation or agitated and disorganised behaviour. They are likely to present with a range of signs and symptoms such as:

- ▶ Extreme ongoing distress when separated from a loved one;
- ▶ Frequent sickness, headaches or stomach aches;
- ▶ Nightmares;
- ▶ Inability to play;
- ▶ Concentration and memory problems;
- ▶ Difficulty handling sensory input;
- ▶ Aggressiveness;
- ▶ Passive withdrawal;
- ▶ Social and emotional immaturity;
- ▶ Short attention span for developmental age; and
- ▶ Developmental regression (Lamb, 2020, 2017).

While educators cannot fully eliminate the impact of trauma, they can play a vital role in fostering a child's happiness, successful adaptation to adversity, and pave a pathway to resilience.

Resilience is an individual's capacity to withstand and recover from significant challenges that threaten their stability, viability, and development (Masten & Narayan, 2012).

Sensorimotor activities including music, singing, movement, interactive play, and guided visualisation can be effective strategies to relax and regulate a child who has been traumatised, whilst reducing antisocial behavioural presentations.

Sensorimotor experiences to promote resilience in young children

Activity	How does it promote resilience?
Music	Produces relaxing effect or increases arousal, depending on slow or fast music
Singing	Loud-soft; fast-slow; steady rhythms. Achieves balance through regulated breathing; Message = 'everything is okay'
Communal drumming	Fast to increase arousal and slow to produce a relaxed response
Lullabies	Facilitate emotional communication, self-regulation, and attachment
Play-songs	Help to self-regulate emotional responses
Melodic or chordal patterns	Containing or holding pattern to calm an agitated child
Stop-start songs	Self-regulation and co-regulation. Increase child co-operation
Musical call and response	Builds social skills, encourages listening, turn-taking, interactive behaviour, and communication
Movement	Helps to regain balance
Swaying & rocking	Calming effect
Running & jumping	Sensory stimulation providing a 'sense of the body's position'
Dancing	Releases excess energy in hyper-aroused children. Provides containment in circle formations, organised steps, and steady beat
Sensory movement-based activities	Monitoring how the body feels when faced with threat. Act out 'Going on a Bear Hunt' which provides a rhythmic way to explore sensation, overcoming obstacles, e.g., climbing over boulders
Interactive Play	Enhances social system, cooperation & sense of belonging
Ball games	Balance, coordination and cooperation
Games	Shared problem-solving activities
Obstacle courses	Develop problem solving and regulatory skills
Re-enacting dramas	Children may use figurines, props, and toys to re-enact dramas in safe, supportive settings
Peekaboo games	Searching, hide and seek games, beginning and end activities, packing away toys and falling and getting up games help build resilience and address separation issues
Shared imaginative play	Builds social skills, encourages listening, turn-taking, interactive behaviour and communication
Building & knocking down walls	Resilience building activity - children construct and knock down a wall with a collection of recycled boxes
Safe spaces activity	Setting personal boundaries, feelings of safety. Building safe personal spaces with chairs, tables, pillows, blankets, blocks, etc.
Relaxation	Provides containment and grounding. Manages high arousal
Visualisation activities	Support attention and focus. Guided visualisations, breathing exercises, weighted teddy bears, supported body awareness during relaxation

Lamb, 2017 (adapted from Signorelli & Coello, 2011; Wolan et al., 2015).

Flexibility in programming is important. Refugees are not a homogenous group of people, and no two refugee journeys are the same. It is important to gain knowledge about a child, their history and culture and the world view of their family and community, including child-rearing practices relating to play and praise. This knowledge enables the design and tailoring of appropriate individual and group experiences. A child who reacts with fight and flight responses in non-urgent situations, for example, may require calming activities, and a child who withdraws may require more arousal.

Strategies will need revision if undesirable reactions are activated in a child. Certain types of play or activity can trigger post-traumatic responses in children or remind them of past situations in which they were powerless. For example, Signorelli and Coello (2011) caution against singing the song 'Five Little Ducks' with a child who has lost family members. Likewise, 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' may be inadvisable for a child who has taken a perilous boat journey, or experienced floods. 'Hide and seek' may be frightening for a child who has been compelled to hide in confined spaces to survive; and red finger paint might represent blood to a child who has witnessed violence or execution. Auditory triggers such as loud or sudden noises, high-pitched noises, tapping, or fast drumming, and sensory triggers such as enforced eye contact may disturb some children who have been verbally, physically or sexually abused (Lamb, 2017).

If you are concerned about a child's trauma history or presenting behaviour, find out more about the child from their parent or guardian and work with them to contact the torture and trauma survivors' service in your state for information, guidance, and referral protocols - www.fasstt.org.au.

Within the context of safe and protective early childhood environments, by gaining the trust of a child's family by building supportive relationships, and through reflective practice and further research, educators are well-placed to scaffold, protect, and build resilience in young children from refugee backgrounds who have suffered trauma.

References and additional reading

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