



Building Trust with Children Who Have Experienced Trauma



Introduction

Children who have experienced trauma often struggle with trust. They may have been let down by caregivers or experienced unsafe environments that make it difficult for them to feel secure. Building trust is crucial for their healing and development. This handout provides strategies for fostering trust with traumatized children in a supportive and nurturing way.



1. Be Consistent and Predictable

Why it Matters: Trauma can make children feel like they cannot rely on others. Consistent actions and reactions help children feel safe and know what to expect.

How to Do It:

Follow through with promises and commitments.
Maintain routines and schedules when possible.
Ensure your actions match your words.

2. Show Empathy and Understanding

Why it Matters: Children who have experienced trauma may not have had their feelings validated. They need to know their emotions are heard and understood.

How to Do It:

Listen actively to the child's concerns or feelings without interrupting or minimizing them.

Use non-verbal cues (like a gentle tone and open body language) to show you are present and care.

Reflect back their feelings: "It sounds like you're feeling really upset because..."

3. Build Emotional Safety

Why it Matters: Trauma survivors often struggle with feeling emotionally safe. It's essential to create an environment where they can express themselves without fear of judgment.

How to Do It:

Create a calm and predictable environment.

Be patient when they need time to open up.

Avoid reacting with anger or frustration when they express difficult emotions.

Reassure them that it's okay to feel however they feel.

4. Set Healthy Boundaries

Why it Matters: Trauma can create confusion around boundaries. Children need clear, consistent boundaries to feel secure.

How to Do It:

Set clear expectations for behavior in a kind but firm manner.

Respect the child's need for personal space and time.

Be consistent about consequences, ensuring they are fair and not punitive.

5. Demonstrate Patience and Flexibility

Why it Matters: Healing from trauma takes time, and children may exhibit behaviors that challenge your patience. Flexibility allows them to grow at their own pace.

How to Do It:

Understand that trust takes time and may be built in small increments.

Be patient when a child pushes boundaries or withdraws.

Allow for setbacks, knowing that healing is not linear.

6. Be Honest and Transparent

Why it Matters: Trauma survivors often struggle with feeling deceived or lied to. Honesty helps to create an atmosphere of trust.

How to Do It:

Be honest about your intentions and the limitations of what you can offer.

If you make a mistake, own up to it and apologize.

Offer clear, age-appropriate explanations for decisions and changes that affect the child.

7. Encourage Independence and Empowerment

Why it Matters: Children who have experienced trauma may feel powerless. Offering opportunities for autonomy can help them feel more in control of their lives.

How to Do It:

Allow them to make decisions where possible (e.g., choosing activities, setting goals).

Praise their efforts to make positive choices, even if the outcome isn't perfect.

Encourage problem-solving and offer guidance when needed.

8. Provide Positive Reinforcement

Why it Matters: Trauma survivors often internalize feelings of inadequacy. Recognizing their strengths helps build their self-esteem and trust in others.

How to Do It:

Celebrate even small successes and positive behaviors.

Offer praise that is specific and sincere, such as “I noticed how patient you were when you waited your turn.”

Acknowledge their progress toward healing.

9. Be Supportive, Not Overbearing

Why it Matters: Trauma survivors need space to heal at their own pace. Too much pressure can feel overwhelming and may create a sense of distrust.

How to Do It:

Offer support and encouragement without pushing them too hard.

Respect their process and give them time to make decisions.

Allow them to express themselves in their own way and time.

10. Model Healthy Relationships

Why it Matters: Children learn from the relationships they see. By modeling healthy interactions, you can teach them what trust and respect look like.

How to Do It:

Be respectful and considerate in your interactions with others.

Show that it’s okay to have disagreements but still communicate respectfully.

Practice self-regulation and emotional management to demonstrate healthy coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

TRUST

Building trust with children who have experienced trauma is a gradual but incredibly rewarding process. By being consistent, empathetic, and patient, you help create a secure environment where children can begin to heal and rebuild their sense of safety. Always remember that small, positive steps toward building trust can have a significant, lasting impact on a child's life.

