



Power of culture

CREATIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL RESOURCES FOR WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH TRAUMA

Inspired by resources from [The Attachment Institute of New England \(Letter to a Teacher, Letter to an Educator\)](#) [ARC resources](#), [the ARC Framework](#), [resources for kids and teens](#)

Overview: Our brains are wired for survival and young people who have been hurt as young children often function in this survival mode. They need strong, loving, calm, and caring adults who provide a solid structure and know at the same time how to set strong limits. Setting the tone with empathy and care and not with frustration and anger is very crucial. Young people need to feel safe and protected so that they don't have to reach for control through anger, breaking boundaries, and manipulation. Creative adults, who can look at what is underneath or what triggered the presenting behaviors, can better address the behavior AND attend to the feelings (often overwhelmed, sad, scared, angry) that may have sparked the behavior.

Goals: In order to support young people to feel better about themselves and to help them become positive agents of change in their lives, it is important for teachers and CYD leaders to attend to behaviors with a trauma-informed lens in order to:

- Help young people increase their ability to recognize, understand, and know how to work through their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.
- Offer creative opportunities for young people to tell their story so they can recognize and honor the ways they have survived and adapted (including addressing systemic problems that may have caused the trauma in the first place), in order to be able to have a greater awareness of choices and agency in their future.

Be clear on your group rules, guidelines, and limits of confidentiality.

For example:

What is revealed stays in group, with our staff/team. The exceptions to this confidentiality are if you are planning 1. To hurt yourself 2. To hurt another person 3. If you have been seriously hurt by another person or are in danger of being hurt... then, we need to seek additional help.

Understanding: Faced with triggers of danger, young people with a history of trauma often attempt to meet their physiological and relational needs by responding with behaviors.

FIGHT - Signs of high stress levels which often appear very suddenly

- **Reactivity** - Interrupting, irritability, swearing, unexplained anger, aggression, irritability.
- **Neg. Thoughts/Feelings** - Reckless or self-destructive behaviors, stealing, and telling lies.

FLIGHT - physical withdrawal or escape

- **Avoiding contact with others** - Ignoring the teacher's questions or directives, walking ahead of the teacher/other young people, getting out of his/her seat or tipping their chair, isolating, not turning in work, refusing to begin a project, using unclear speech, asking to use the bathroom, asking to get a drink repeatedly, lateness, and running away.

FREEZE - hypervigilant, shutting down, or disconnecting from experience

- **High-alert readiness** - When a person cannot fight or flee a situation of danger they may freeze with a keen alert toward the danger. This often produces an exaggerated startle response seen as jumpiness or impulsivity.
- **Numbing down** - Having a dazed look or seemingly checked out - only showing one emotion or none at all.

Possible CYD One-liners to Use

One-liners are an important tool that place responsibility for "inappropriate" actions or words with the child rather than on the leader and enable the leader to still attend to the group by being able to better sidestep the power struggles. The key is to use just a few words and speak in an **even, calm tone without anger or sarcasm**. It can really help to continue to state your simplified request calmly and on repeat, until positive action is taken. Then you can talk.

Assume next steps will be completed:

- Try not to say, "If you..." say instead, "When you..." or "as soon as...". For example, say "Feel free to join us at ____ (the art table) as soon as you are done."
- "Do you need one or two minutes before you are ready?"
- "This is an opportunity for you to..."
- "Just start with one color, do you want the yellow or the blue?"
- "I see that you worked very hard in finishing this second step. As soon as the rest are done like that, you'll have a finished piece."
- "Don't worry, you and this project are worth the wait."

When a young person needs a "warning":

- "Uh oh, you forgot that..."
- "How sad..." or "Hmmmmmm"
- "I am confused ..." or "I am curious why..."
- "I think you may have meant to say..."
- "When a student says, "I'm stupid," say, "Aren't you glad that I don't believe that," or "I am here to believe in you even if you don't right now."
- "I'll be glad to listen when your volume of your voice matches mine."
- "That's too bad." or "Dang..." and use "ouch" and "oops"
- "That's an interesting way to..."
- "Is this the right place for doing what you are doing?"
- "Hmm. That is not a decision that will give you the most power."
- "What do you think you are going to do about this?" or "What do you think I am thinking?"
- "I listen to one person at a time . . . thanks."

- "Do you feel strong enough to try something new?"
- "It feels like you want to be alone right now, do you?"
- "I respect you too much to argue with you right now."

After an incident, questions to ask when they are calming down:

- "Do you want to talk in three or five minutes?"
- "You must have had a good reason for doing this, tell me what you were thinking..."
- "I'm so glad you are willing to talk to me about that. Can you tell me more?"
- "You don't need to tell me what is going on, but can you tell me, does it relate to peers, family, yourself, the world, or me?"
- "I understand how difficult this must be for you. What has helped in the past? What are you willing to do today?"
- "I want to help you – let's talk about some options that will work for you today."
- "What three things would be most helpful today?"
- "Let's develop a safety plan that will work for you."

Questions for Care-givers and Teachers*

Stay curious

- What is the young person's body communicating to me?
- Do they seem to be looking for space or for more engagement, or attention?
- Do they seem to be seeking more activity or less stimulation? Movement or stillness?
- Is there a way that their body's needs can be met safely and creatively?

What am I feeling right now?

- Is there a way that I can name what I'm feeling appropriately?
- Is there a way that I can meet my own body's needs safely and appropriately given the context of the situation? This might mean taking a breath, asking for help, or using any regulation strategies that work for you in the moment.

Why noticing and naming our own regulation is important

Trauma impacts the way kids interpret affect and nonverbal cues from others; they are more likely to notice even microscopic shifts in the faces and bodies of adults, but they are also more likely to misinterpret those shifts as signs of danger. When we name our feelings and needs in safe and appropriate ways, over time, kids can learn to tolerate and understand the responses they are likely already noticing and reacting to all the time.

Naming and using our own regulation strategies is incredible modeling for young people who often think of themselves as defective for needing regulation support. Even the most well-adjusted humans in the world need to regulate their bodies... that is something to celebrate and talk about as much as we can!