

TIPS FOR HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN UNDERSTAND AND MANAGE BIG FEELINGS AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

When young children have empathetic, consistent, reliable supportive adults in their lives, they are more likely to learn how to self-soothe in stressful situations. By helping children understand and manage their feelings and behaviours, we can support their development, settlement, healing and resilience.

For preschool children, it's important to:

- Talk about feelings. Let children know it's okay to have strong feelings, but not OK to hurt others.
- Tune in to children's emotions. Notice when they're struggling with big feelings (anxiety, sadness, anger) and behaviours, and encourage positive emotional expression.
- Acknowledge and validate emotions. Label feelings and provide visual tools to help children identify and communicate emotions. You can use a feelings chart, feelings charades, puppets and story books and/or labeled pictures of children experiencing different emotions.
- Even if children don't yet have the language, using a program like Zones of Regulation, and associated visuals can help children express how they feel.
- Tell children that you are there to help them calm their strong feelings if they need you
- Practise self-soothing and calming exercises like deep breathing, imagining something soothing, listening to a quiet song, blowing bubbles or children's yoga. By teaching refugee children how to self-soothe, we can help them to regulate their emotions in order to attain/maintain a state of alert calm that will allow them to engage in play and learning.
- Incorporate physical activity into your program daily. It reduces stress and helps children to manage emotions and energy.
- Provide opportunities to express emotions through art and sensory play (e.g., using paint, crayons, pencils, paper, clay, play dough, sand).
- Enhance the sensory materials in your environment. Use a variety of textures in all areas. Have a small pillow or soft blanket available for when children need a break.
- Read or tell children stories about feelings and how other children manage big emotions.
- Help children understand the link between feelings, thoughts and behaviours (keeping the child's age in mind).



As an educator and caregiver:

- Be culturally sensitive and remember that each child is different. What works well in helping one child to handle intense feelings may not work for another.
- Be clear, calm, consistent, honest and genuine. Every day, we have opportunities to set a good example in how we manage our feelings. For example, if you find yourself getting upset by a child's behaviour, remember that before you can be emotionally and physically safe in managing the child you must be completely in charge of your own feelings. Take a breath and get calm before you react.
- Provide realistic and consistent limits and boundaries to help children feel safe and secure. When children feel secure, they are less likely to test limits with challenging behaviour.
- Practise lots of patience and understanding. Remember that when a child has been through trauma, sometimes their behaviour is fear/grief-based. At these times, a child who has experienced trauma CANNOT behave differently. It's not that they WON'T behave differently. They are not being stubborn. Rather, they are having a physical response to a trigger. Program staff might need to get support so that they can help the child through the challenge of managing triggers and emotions/behaviours of this kind.

For infants and toddlers, focus on consistently and reliably meeting the child's physical needs. The more you can anticipate a child's needs before they get upset, the better. This means:

- Carefully observing and getting to know the child. Talk to the parent if possible to find out their usual routines.
- Creating a soothing environment. Loud noises can be a strong trauma reminder for babies and toddlers. Keep the environment as soothing as possible with soft lighting and calm voices.
- Taking it slow and using texture and movement to calm and soothe babies.
- Tuning in to infants' and toddlers' non-verbal signs.

