

Holding Space Program: Supporting the Emotional Journey of Implementing Trauma-informed Practice in Early Childhood Settings

Workshop 4: Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: Regulating Yourself and Your Classroom

Implemented on the CSU Albury-Wodonga Campus Tuesday June 10th 2025

Notes to Accompany Workshop Slides

In this workshop we discussed the importance of somato-sensory experiences in helping children (and adults) regulate their nervous systems, which may become dysregulated after experiencing traumatic or overwhelming events. We also offered some experiences that you can use for yourself and the children in your care, particularly bilateral and rhythmic movements.

Somatic sensory system

Somatic means body, which is derived from the Greek word 'Soma' meaning body. When we say something is somatic we mean it relates to the body and the experience of being in your body, such as movements, sensations and physical awareness. People who have experienced trauma or adverse experiences can often feel dissociated from their body. Somato-sensory experiences can help calm the nervous system and release stored trauma and stress by reconnecting individuals to their bodies and helping them to process the trauma.

SLIDES 8, 9 & 10: Bilateral Movement

Bilateral movement is the process of using both sides of the body at the same time in a coordinated way. This promotes and enhances communication between the left and right side of the brain which may become inhibited after traumatic or adverse experiences.

How Bilateral Movement Helps after Traumatic or Adverse Experiences:

1. **Regulation of the Nervous System:** Bilateral movements help activate both the left and right sides of the brain, which can aid in calming the nervous system. This is especially important for individuals dealing with traumatic or adverse experiences, as it can help shift them out of the "fight or flight" state and into a more balanced, grounded state.
2. **Calming the Amygdala:** The Amygdala, which is responsible for processing fear and threat responses, can be overstimulated in trauma survivors. Bilateral movement has been shown to have a calming effect on the Amygdala, helping the body and mind feel safer.
3. **Enhancing Brain Integration:** Traumatic and adverse experiences can cause certain brain functions to become disjointed, especially when memories or emotions related to the trauma are stored in a fragmented way. Bilateral movements help "bridge" the two hemispheres of the brain, promoting more effective communication and integration between them.
4. **Improved Emotional Processing:** Moving in a bilateral way can help individuals access and process emotions that may have been suppressed or trapped in the body due to traumatic or adverse experiences. This can lead to a greater sense of emotional regulation and emotional release.

5. Rebuilding Body Awareness: Many people who experience trauma often dissociate from their bodies or have difficulty feeling safe in their own skin. Bilateral movement helps to reconnect the body and mind, increasing awareness and comfort with physical sensations.

Slide 9: Butterfly Hugs

- Cross your arms over your chest and slowly tap on each shoulder, one hand at a time. You can incorporate deep breathing with this while repeating the affirmation “I am safe”.

Slide 10:

- **Bilateral drawing, painting, finger painting**
 - Using big pieces of paper, encourage children to draw, paint, or finger paint with both hands at the same time. You can also do this by putting paint directly onto a large tabletop (i.e. not using paper).
- **Crawling**
 - Encourage children to crawl like a particular animal such as a wombat, bear, turtle or crab; crawl backward, sideways, slow, fast.
- **Cross Crawling songs**
 - **Waddle-lee Archer** (There are many versions on YouTube, and you can get the melody from YouTube. Treena finds this version is the easiest to use with young children.)

Waddle-lee Archer, Waddle-lee Archer,
(arms out to the side and cross over the midline of the body twice)
Dooderly do, dooderly do
(One hand on opposite ear and the other hand on the other ear, then bring them back to the front and swap over) or for older children (one hand touches the nose and the other hand touches the opposite ear, then change
Waddle-lee Archer, Waddle-lee Archer,
(arms out to the side and cross over the midline of the body twice)
Dooderly do, dooderly do
(One hand on opposite ear and the other hand on the other ear, then bring them back to the front and swap over) or for older children (one hand touches the nose and the other hand touches the opposite ear, then change
I like the rest, part the part I like best (tap knees twice and clap twice)
Goes Dooderly dooderly, dooderly dooderly, dooderly dooderly do, Whooo
(on each dooderly have one hand on the opposite ear and the other on the other ear and swap, on Whoo put hands in air)
 - **I Like Climbing Trees for Apples**

I like climbing trees for apples, trees for apples, trees for apple

(pretend climbing action in a cross crawling style i.e. right leg and left arm up then left leg and right arm)

I like climbing trees for apples

I reach up high, I pick them off and then I eat my apples, and then I eat my apples

(pretend to reach and pick one and pretend to eat it)

Sing about other fruit like; oranges, pears, peaches

SLIDE 11: Window of Tolerance

As part of our workshop series, we are providing you with some frameworks of how to view the effects of trauma on the nervous system and its impact on regulation and dysregulation. So far, we have introduced the “Iceberg model” showing that there is more laying under the surface than the behaviour is demonstrating. The “Lotus model”, another way of explaining “regulate, relate and reason” and the “Communication model” demonstrating that all behaviour is communicating how either safe or not safe, a child may feel.

Dan Siegel, a pioneer in psychiatry and child development, proposes the concept of the “Window of Tolerance” (Siegel, 1999). The Window of Tolerance refers to the range of psychological and emotional distress a person can tolerate before they become dysregulated. Within the “window” the nervous system is in a balanced state and the person can remain regulated, cope with stress, think clearly, engage socially and is open to learning.

Unprocessed trauma, amongst other things, such as sensory processing issues, retained reflexes and spectrum disorders, can cause this Window of Tolerance to be very narrow, meaning a person can become dysregulated very quickly, causing them to be either hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused. Hyper-arousal of the nervous system is the fight/flight/fawn/appease response. A child may exhibit behaviours such as anger, hitting, punching, biting, running away, intense emotional outbursts, being easily distracted, impulsive, anxiousness, or appeasing behaviours. Hypo-arousal of the nervous system is the freeze response. The child may exhibit behaviours such as dissociating, numbness, depression, fatigue, lethargy, immobilisation, social withdrawal and shut down.

As educators, our aim is to help children to widen their Window of Tolerance so that they are less likely to become dysregulated. We can do this through our interactions with children and ensuring that we also stay within our own Window of Tolerance; and by providing a calm environment with predictable routines, a program that helps children develop emotional vocabulary, and by providing calming and somato-sensory experiences throughout the day.

SLIDE 14: Bilateral Rhythmic Drumming

Provide children (and adults) with a drum or some kind of percussion instrument. Encourage them to create rhythms that use both hands, allowing them to focus on the coordinated movement of both sides of their body.

How Drumming Helps Regulate the Nervous System

1. Rhythm Calms the Brain

- Repetitive, predictable rhythms activate the brain's regulatory systems. This can shift a person from a dysregulated state (anxious, hyper, shut down) to a more calm and focused state.
- Rhythm mimics safe patterns—like the heartbeat or rocking—that help the brain feel safe as this is what a baby would hear and feel in the womb (see Bruce Perry's video in the workshop for a great explanation).

2. Releases Stress Through Movement

- Hitting a drum or tapping out beats offers a safe way to release big emotions—like anger, fear, or sadness.
- The physical activity of drumming also helps burn off adrenaline and cortisol, which build up during stress.

3. Rebuilds Body Awareness and Control

- Trauma can disconnect a person from their body. Drumming reconnects them to what their hands are doing, how their body is moving, and how they can control rhythm—giving a sense of agency and confidence.

4. Creates a Sense of Connection

- Group drumming (like in a circle) builds synchrony—participants feel “in tune” with each other. This supports social regulation, trust, and emotional attunement, all of which are disrupted by trauma and adversity.

SLIDES 16, 17, & 18: A Scenario and Response

In the workshop, Sheena offered a personal example of arriving for her first day at work as a preschool teacher to find herself entering a particularly chaotic and emotionally charged classroom. Rather than sharing that personal example online, perhaps think of your own examples that you can share with your colleagues in your own early childhood setting. Over the following slides, Sheena shared some of the strategies she used to create a community of respect; a community of regulation in that particular preschool room; and in many other classrooms during her career (including primary school classrooms). See also the information we have provided under the Slide 11 notes – the Window of Tolerance for other strategies: *As educators, our aim is to help children to widen their Window of Tolerance so that they are less likely to become dysregulated. We can do this through our interactions with children and ensuring that we also stay within our own Window of Tolerance; and by providing a calm environment with predictable routines, a program that helps children*

develop emotional vocabulary, and by providing calming and somato-sensory experiences throughout the day.

Slide 17: Start the day with a somato-sensory activity and have regular short somato-sensory breaks

One example of a somato-sensory activity that Sheena shared (and that the children she worked with absolutely loved!) was *'The Poor King'*. You will find this poem/rhyme in a wonderful book published in 1991 by Pat Smith called *'Rhyme, chant, song and dance in the language classroom'*. Unfortunately the book is now out of print, so we have shared the words below. However, there are many other great rhyme and poem books that you can also use for ideas. Scatter these somato-sensory experiences throughout the day, and before you know it the children will be chanting them without you, and asking for more!

The first time through, the song is sung with words and without actions and sounds; the second time through, with words and actions (make them up with the children); and the third time through use actions and sounds instead of words.

The poor king found a (A) goldfish in his bath, a goldfish in his (B) bath, a (A) goldfish in his (B) bath. The poor king found a (A) goldfish in his (B) bath, that swam between his toes.

The poor king found a (C) monkey in his (D) soup, a (C) monkey in his (D) soup, a (C) monkey in his (D) soup. The poor king found a (C) monkey in his (D) soup, that pulled the poor king's beard.

The poor king found a (E) tiger in his (F) bed, a (E) tiger in his (F) bed, a (E) tiger in his (F) bed. The poor king found a (E) tiger in his (F) bed, that ate the poor king up.

Action	Sound
(A) Move your hand to suggest the movement of a fish swimming	A bubbling gurgling sound made by waggling the tongue up and down
(B) Move your hand to mime turning off a tap	Pssh
(C) Scratch your chest with both hands	Ape sound
(D) Lift an imaginary spoon to your mouth as if drinking soup	Slurping sound
(E) Move hands like clawing paws	Harrh
(F) Place hands together against tilted head	Snoring sound

Other ways that you can experiment with rhythm when singing or chanting rhythmic songs include:

- Whisper it
- Accent some words
- Say it to your shoes; up your sleeve; out the window (the children used to love this!)
- Shout it
- Stomp it
- Begin soft and get louder
- Begin loud and get softer
- Whisper it.....

As you can see on Slide 17, it is really important not to force children to join in – they will come when they feel safe. Perhaps use bilateral rhythmic drumming as well; or if you know how to play a musical instrument then please do so!

Start collecting poem books, nonsense rhyme books and create a song box with some rhythmic instruments.

SLIDE 20: TAKE A LITTLE MOMENT

We chose to finish our workshop with a ‘take a little moment’ where we all sang and tried the actions to Waddle-lee Archer. Enjoy!