

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

Workshop 1: Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: The Power of Connection (the little moments) AND Introducing the Neurosequential Model

Implemented on the CSU Albury-Wodonga Campus Tuesday March 4th 2025

Notes to Accompany Workshop Slides

SLIDES 7 & 8: TAKE A LITTLE MOMENT (Dr Rosie Saxton)

This activity connects to the key take away on Slides 5 & 10: Create a community of respect, a community of regulation.

The purpose of this 'take a little moment' activity is to take a moment to "arrive". It is an activity that can easily be done with a group of children every morning, or more frequently if you like. If you are using the slides to implement your own workshop with colleagues, then you can also use the activity to help colleagues "arrive" before starting. We provide a simple version of the neuroscience related to the activity underneath the wording below.

Please note that the following wording is suggested wording and please adapt as needed for your setting or purpose.

Suggested wording

However you got here, however your day has been up to now, this is a new environment with a bunch of new people. Now that we are all gathered in this space, which may or may not be familiar to you, let's take a moment to "arrive".

Only if it feels OK for you to do so, I invite you to close your eyes and check in with yourself as to how you feel, specifically your level of safety. Of course you can do this with your eyes open if you prefer. What lets you know, inside your body whether you feel safe enough or not? Now open your eyes and take a slow look around the space that we're in, taking note of anything that you enjoy looking at and anything that causes a less pleasant internal response. Make sure that you look behind you, underneath the desk and above your head.

Notice how you feel about where you are in relation to the exit, to the windows. How does your body specifically let you know the cues of danger or safety? There are no right or wrong answers to this question.

If there is anything or anybody to whom you have a particularly noticeable response, take a moment to check in as to whether that really constitutes a danger and get curious about why you may have had that response.

Once you have satisfied yourself that this is a safe enough place, check inside and notice if anything feels different as a result of the exercise, which it may or may not.

The Neuroscience

Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, our brains are constantly assessing our external environment for cues of danger or cues of safety. Our natural bias is to look for danger, as ignoring a drooling tiger could be a serious mistake. This assessment involves many parts of the brain but the part that initiates the assessment is in the brainstem, also sometimes known as the reptilian brain or the hindbrain. The initial orientation is incredibly rapid with vision, hearing and the other senses all heightened to glean as much information about the environment as possible. Once it is established that there are no cues of danger, the nervous system settles.

Tuning in consciously to this process by attending to our internal environment can be very helpful in doing a reality check, thereby potentially reducing anxiety and settling our own nervous system. It can also help us to recognise specific cues of safety or danger that may have roots in our history (for example, the smell of mothballs is a cue of safety for me as it reminds me of my grandmother and a certain perfume has the opposite effect as it is associated for me with an unpleasant person).

Doing this exercise with your class (as age appropriate), models regulation, provides co-regulation and will likely give clues as to children's specific needs in relation to cues of safety or of danger (for example, those that need to be near the exit, those who need to have a clear view of you as much as possible, those who need to avoid direct eye contact). I have deliberately used the phrase "safe enough" as "safe" may be a problematic word to use with traumatised individuals where the word may have been used but the actions that went with it were far from safe. Finding a more neutral word than "safe" is a good idea. One idea for a word that you can use in place of the word 'safe' that we explored in the workshop was the word 'okay'.

SLIDES 11 & 12: THE FEELING OF BEING HEARD/NOT HEARD (Dr Rosie Saxton and Kate Fiske)

This activity connects to the key take away on Slides 5 & 10: Create a community of respect, a community of regulation. It also connects to all three key take aways on Slide 10: It's not what you know, it's how you are; the most powerful tool you have is you; and, little moments are powerful.

The purpose of the deep listening activity is to provide the experience of being held in another's full attention. Throughout a regular day we find ourselves in conversation and although this is important we might often be listening while our own mind is thinking of what we want to say next. The power of just listening is both regulating for the nervous system and for the mind as there is nothing to add, nothing to fix, just being present. Deep listening can also encourage us to drop judgement and our own mind chatter and just listen. In terms of children, the first stage of "emotion coaching" is to listen and validate the feelings being expressed. Being an active listener that can wait, listen and validate a child when they express their feelings is a crucial part of building a regulated brain.

Please adapt the prompt 'tell me about your day today' as needed for your setting or purpose.

SLIDES 13 & 14: TAKE A LITTLE MOMENT (Dr Vicky Graham)

This activity connects to the key take away on Slides 5 & 10: Create a community of respect, a community of regulation. It also connects to all three key take aways on Slide 10: It's not what you know, it's how you are; the most powerful tool you have is you; and, little moments are powerful.

Closing Activity: No Sweeter Sound

Why are there so many techniques to help people learn names?

Because... it is a powerful connector.

So let's take a moment and notice.

How it feels to be welcomed - with your name.

The purpose of this activity is to develop and strengthen connections with others. The activity can be done in a group with adults and children. It is a great way to start the day with children in an early childhood education service in circle time. You can also use a child's chosen movement, along with their name, to connect with them throughout the day (try it with colleagues as well!).

Circle up activity

- Give your name
- Add a movement
- Include a detail of your choice (this is a great chance to support children and colleagues to focus on their positive qualities or on labelling their feelings – e.g. "I am a caring person" "I am feeling happy today")
- Everyone repeats what you said and did
- Move to the next person

Here's an example:

"My name is Vicky. And I'm a Vision Therapist!

(I open my arms in a V shape)

Key take home messages:

- This activity can be done in a group with adults and children.
- Once an individual has chosen a movement to connect with their name, it can be used by others to connect with them throughout the day.
- Each person can choose how to be remembered.
- Over the next few days after doing the activity, notice how you feel when hearing your own name (and encourage children to do the same).