

# Supporting Disaster Resiliency in Children





# A.C.O.R.N. Toolkit Introduction

One of the greatest struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic has been how best to explain to children what is going on. How do you make sense of something that has more questions than answers?

How do you empower children so that they feel safe again after a disaster or a traumatic event?

The Children and Youth in Disasters (CYID) subgroup of the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) in Kansas City, Missouri has endeavored to develop toolkits for educators, day care providers, anyone working with children, that would equip them with age appropriate means to begin these difficult conversations about any sort of disaster, process what happened and regain a sense of control.

To accomplish this goal, the CYID developed A.C.O.R.N. This acronym was chosen because acorns are the seeds of mighty oak trees and are symbolic of rebirth, growth and prosperity. A.C.O.R.N. is based on and aligns with the five stages of PTSD response:

(A)cknowledge The Situation/Impact and Emergence Stage

(C)omprehending What's Going On/Denial and Numbing Stage

(O)ngoing Stress, Questions, How Can I Cope/Rescue and Intrusive Stage

(R)egaining A Sense of Control/Short-term and Intermediary Stage

(N)ow What Happens/Long-term Recovery Stage

This toolkit is not intended to replace formal clinical therapeutic intervention when such is indicated but rather to further support anyone working with children and who would like additional guidance on dealing with very difficult situations. The toolkit is designed such that while it follows the common pathway of children's PTSD responses, it can also be tailored to fit the needs of any specific child. It is important to note that not every child who experiences a disaster will develop PTSD but may still benefit from some of the toolkit exercises. Not every task or category will necessarily be needed for everyone. This may entail only using some of the exercises in each section or perhaps even repeating an earlier section. It is important to note that children will each have their own unique responses to situations and things do not always progress in a linear fashion! Caregivers can use this toolkit in its entirety or use selected sections as deemed appropriate. The CYID wishes to sincerely thank everyone working with children during good and not so good times for because of your efforts, the world will be a better place.



## (A)cknowledge The Situation/Impact and Emergence Stage Introduction

In this initial stage of PTSD response, everything is fresh, having just happened. Emotions are likely to be very raw and people, big people included, may be in shock. It is at this point that conversations about what occurred are beginning to happen and clear, age appropriate communication is vital. Some children may not yet be ready to discuss whatever it is that happened and that is OK! In this section you will see ideas for how to begin these often difficult conversations, encourage discussion and provide comfort. In addition to what

is offered in this section, providers may also wish to look at information from [Substand Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) for further guidance.



# Prep Step Checklist: Y.E.S.

Preparations before the conversation can be just as important as the conversation! Making sure that you are able to remain calm and have what you need before beginning a discussion with children about a disaster can make all the difference! Children pick up on cues and model what they see! Y.E.S. (You, Environment and Students) highlights things to consider in this preparation phase.

## You

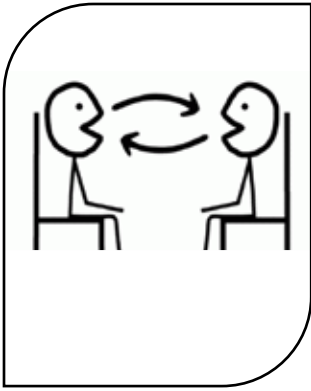
- Am I ready to have this discussion? Remember, you are human and it's OK to wait!
- Consider your tone and volume of your voice and your appearance. Think, if I were one of these children listening, what would I think?
- Can I speak with confidence, do I have correct information? It's OK if you do not have every answer because no one does! What's important is you know as much as you can and model finding out the rest together!
- Practice makes perfect! Consider practicing what you will say and how you may respond to questions.
- How can I use age appropriate stories and examples to make points? What might children be able to relate to?
- More is not always better, think information overload!
- Listening ears, do I have mine on? Using reflective listening to communicate a child has been heard and understood.
- Always have a Plan B if things do not go as planned. What is my Plan B?

## Environment

- Is the room a welcoming, safe and friendly place to have this discussion? What might make it more so? Think space, temperature, scents, textures, lighting and familiarity.
- Shhhhhhhhhhh, is there a safe and quiet place for someone to go if he/she needs it? Is someone available to assist with a child that may need extra support?
- What can I make available to children that may help in keeping them calm? Think stuffed animals, fidget toys, rocking chairs, bean bags, etc.

## Students

- Know your audience! Consider temperaments, individual needs, what has and has not worked well in the past?
- Have I talked with parents and guardians about this discussion? How might they be incorporated into the discussion or afterwards? What can I do to help them respond to additional questions that may arise after the discussion?



## What The What: The Conversation

OK, so now you have thought about are you ready to do this, the environment in which to have the conversation, and your audience but, starting that conversation is not always easy! Here you will find some suggestions on how to start things off, communication strategies and how to know when things are maybe becoming too much!

💡 Remember to never assume that you know what they know! Ask for example, what have you heard about? This will also give you the opportunity to better understand where someone is at, what his/her current needs may be,

and to correct any misinformation.

💡 Try to break down issues into age appropriate simpler terms and to avoid unnecessary imagery. Younger children may create images in their heads based on what you say that could be disturbing.

💡 Be aware of your own biases and avoid descriptions that focus on someone's ethnicity, sexual identity, weight, etc. Describe things in general terms for example, a man, a woman, a group of people...)

💡 Use words, ideas and relationships that children may be able to relate to. For example, if someone stole something, you could say "remember when someone took your lunch?" Making the conversation relevant to children helps them to better relate and discuss their own feelings.

💡 Try to use basic terms like sad, mad or afraid. Avoid statements like, "flipped his/her lid." This keeps the conversation in terms that children are more likely to understand.

💡 Communicate and reassure that someone is in charge or working to fix what happened. For example, the doctors will help people feel better again.

💡 Ask open ended questions to generate something other than a yes or no answer. For example you could say, what are you thinking right now? This may generate more details as to where children are at with things and lead to more discussion.

💡 Look for any positives in the situation. For example, people are giving food to those who lost everything. What can we do to help?

💡 Remember not to interrupt and allow children time to express themselves.

💡 It's OK to tell children that you don't know why something happened and that maybe you can find answers together.

💡 Be sensitive to children's individual temperaments and emotions. Consider using the thermometer below to better recognize warning signs that something may be too much for someone. This exercise allows the thermometer to be tailored to that specific child's age and functioning level. It is important to remember that no two children will express a particular emotion in exactly the same way and their own definitions of an emotion can be completely different from child to child. For example, happy to one child may mean something completely different to another child in the same group. This thermometer can be re-used throughout the stages of this toolkit as a means of continual assessment of where a child is at with things and form the basis for further discussions.

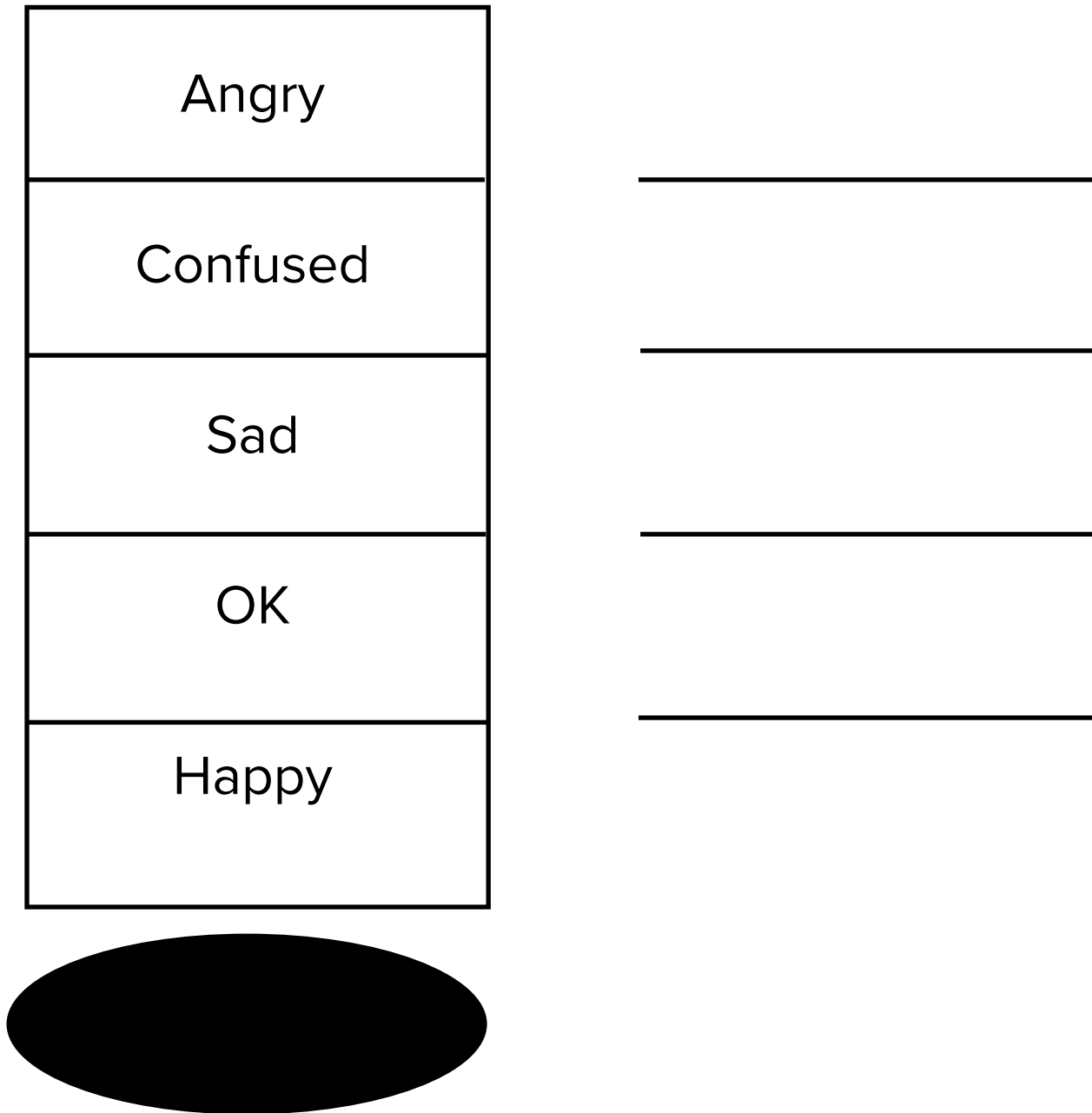


# My Feelings Thermometer

The categories in the thermometer represent feelings that children may be feeling about any sort of disaster. They are not mutually exclusive in that someone for example may be confused but overall, OK. Children can draw what their faces look like when they are each of these emotions or pictures taken of them with what they say is that particular emotion and then transferred onto the paper. You may also want to consider having children write a word or two about what each emotion means to them. For example, angry means I feel hot. Children may even be encouraged to associate a color with each emotion to further aide in communication. This exercise helps

children develop their own ability to identify emotions, convey to adults how they experience each, and gives them a means with which to communicate where they are at as you progress through this toolkit. Some children at this stage may not be very talkative and incorporating nonverbal means of communication may help to build trust.

The diagram below can be used with the feelings thermometer.





## S.P.A.R.K.

Be mindful that at this stage, you are still in the Acknowledge The Situation phase of things. This corresponds to the Impact and Emergence stage of PTSD responses. Something has happened and everyone is trying to make sense of it. For children, a little creativity may assist with helping them be able to convey what their thoughts are at this point in a non-threatening and safe manner. S.P.A.R.K. stands for Stories, Pictures, Activities, Rest and Kindness).

### Stories

📖 Have children begin a story that can be added to as you advance through this toolkit. At the end of the toolkit, children will have a hard copy that they themselves made that stands as a symbol of how they successfully made it through a difficult time! Remember that stories can be told with words, pictures or both.

📖 Consider having the group put together a story where you provide the basic sentences but the children must fill in the blanks with words. As you progress in the toolkit, gradually phase out how much you do and increase the number of blanks the children must fill in until they are writing all of the sentences in the story. This may be less intimidating than having children each write their own stories and take some of the pressure off! Same as above, at the end of the toolkit, each child could be given a hard copy of their accomplishment.

### Pictures

🖼️ Many children love to draw and to create something. Have children make a quilt of pictures! Each picture represents where he/she is at in that point of the toolkit. As you progress through the toolkit, join the pictures together to form a quilt that serves as a symbol of all their hard work and further put successful closure to a difficult situation.

🖼️ As with the stories, the quilt of pictures can easily be done in a group format where everyone makes the contribution that he/she is ready to make!

### Activities

🎵 Consider having children write songs about their feelings at this point. This can be done individually, in a group format or both! Verses can be added as you advance through the toolkit.

☐ Some children may be reluctant to, in any way at this point, to let you know what they are thinking and feeling but may be able and willing to project onto a character what they themselves are thinking and feeling. Create either through drawing or using felt cutouts that can be re-used, a character. Discussion can then be had about how that character may be feeling or what is being thought. This may help to provide some insight about where he/she/they are in processing whatever the trauma/ disaster was.

🗳️ Have children create Thought Boxes out of shoe boxes or something similar. In it, children can place pieces of paper with a word(s) on it as to how they feel, what they are thinking, etc. As things progress, ask if someone would like to share their Thought Box with the group? Sometimes if children hear that a



peer was feeling a certain way, it may bring comfort that they were not alone in their thinking. It could further generate group discussions about what was presented. Remember not to ever force a child to share his/her Thought Box.

## Rest and Kindness

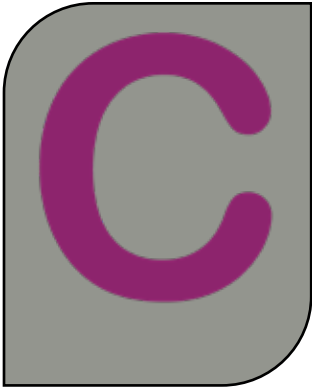
♥ It is important to remember that not all children will be ready to discuss something traumatic that has happened, such as some sort of disaster. Remember that there is such thing as too much of something even if it is well-intended. You know your children better than anyone. It's OK to stay in a particular phase of the toolkit longer than you may have anticipated. It is further OK to go back to a part of the toolkit that had already been completed. Don't forget yourself in all of this! How are YOU doing? How are YOU feeling? Whatever it is that has happened likely was traumatic for everyone so give yourself a break!

♥ Do something to liven up the mood, play a favorite game, watch a favorite program, whatever is sure to bring some smiles!

♥ Play Ring of Smiles! Each person maybe tells a joke, makes a silly face or pays someone a compliment. Whatever brings a smile! Caution though, set limits...what someone may consider funny, think certain sounds.

## Next Step Prep

Check back in with children and see what they know and not what we think they know and understand at this point. This provides the opportunity to gain a better understanding of where each child is at before you decide if it is time to advance to the next stage of the toolkit, C, or Comprehending What is Going on. This corresponds with the Denial and Numbing Stage of PTSD.



## (C)omprehending What's Going On/ Denial and Numbing Stage

In this section, the initial shock of whatever occurred has processed some however, much work remains to be done. In this phase of things, you will be continuing discussions previously started. You may wish to consider further use of S.P.A.R.K. or Stories, Pictures, Activities, Rest and Kindness that was in the prior section. Remember, you are human and it's OK to say, "I don't know and to look for answers together!"



## Listener's Lounge: All As

At this point in the toolkit, the disaster/traumatic event has happened and some discussion has started to occur about it. Children and adults alike are trying to make sense of what occurred. As a defense mechanism, some, especially children, may be very reluctant to speak about the incident. This stage of the toolkit corresponds with the Denial/Numbing stage of PTSD meaning children may be more reluctant to say much about what happened thus increasing the need for compassion, active listening and discussion when they are ready. In the Listener's Lounge it's all As or attitude, attention and adjustment by you to help children feel like they have been heard and what

they had to say was valued. Simple...not always! Here you will learn tips for doing exactly this!

### Attitude

- ☺ Make sure that you have the time to do this, now is not the time to rush anything!
- ☺ Be objective and open to what children may have to say. Accept the feelings and perceptions even if you do not agree!
- ☺ Remember that children's feelings can be very intense initially and by giving them the space to convey what they need to may help them work through that. Sometimes this intensity is necessary in order to be able to move on to finding solutions!
- ☺ Let the discussion go only as far as the child is ready to take it, never push. Patience is a virtue!
- ☺ Don't have a specific outcome in mind, let things progress as they will. There is no "right" or specific place that things need to be at this point, everyone is different so go with the flow!

### Attention

- 👂 By listening to children you are communicating that they are worthy of attention and their perspectives are important. Being an active listener is key at this point to encourage further discussion.
- 👂 Nonverbal cues such as nodding, eye contact or leaning in to hear what someone is saying will convey you are interested in what he/she is saying and foster more talk! Watch for things like crossing your arms, sighing and other things that may give off a vibe of disinterest or dissatisfaction.
- 👂 Paraphrase, never parrot what a child has said.
- 👂 Feeling listening responses focus on the emotions the child may be feeling. For example, if a child is talking about having seen a storm or pictures of one and being unable to sleep, you could say "when you saw the storm pictures, you were scared to sleep."
- 👂 A clarification listening response is taking a deeper look at what the child said. Using the above example, you might say, "when you saw the storm pictures, you were scared to sleep and thought you had to stay awake to stay safe."

# Adjustment

🗨️ To demonstrate reflective or active listening try one of these conversation starters:

🗨️ If I heard you right...

🗨️ Sounds like...

🗨️ So you would like to change...

🗨️ You're worried that...

🗨️ You aren't sure...

🗨️ You wish...

🗨️ That made you feel...



# The 3 Rs for Safe and Sound

When children first begin to deal with a disaster it's not uncommon for them to develop defense mechanisms of denial and numbing. This protects them from having to fully confront something that they are not yet ready to. During this time in particular it's important for children to feel safe and sound. A part of that are the three Rs or Re-establishing A Routine, Reassurance and Rest.

## Re-establishing A Routine

🕒 Begin to re-implement normal schedules and routines to the extent possible. If changes are needed to the routine even just temporarily, consider creating a visual chart of the new schedule that is easy for kids to follow. Sometimes seeing what is coming next may help to alleviate anxiety during a difficult time.

🕒 Be sure to incorporate familiar objects, people, etc. as much as possible! These should be things that evoke feelings of comfort.

🕒 Consider using connect the dot pictures to convey schedules and chunks of time in terms that children can relate to. You can use an existing connect the dot picture or make your own. For example, if you have five different periods or activities make a picture with that many dots where each dot represents one of those activities. Each time you proceed to the next activity you connect a dot. This serves as a visual representation of time for children. You can implement the same concept by taking a coloring page and dividing it up into five pieces using the same example as above. Every time an activity is completed color that portion of the picture or have a child color it. This way kids can see how close they are to something based on how completed the picture is. During a time of such unpredictability as a disaster, it is nice for children to know what they can expect!

## Reassurance

♥ Point out the ways teachers, parents, etc. make kids feel safe and what they do to accomplish this. Keep it simple and avoid overwhelming children with details.

♥ Ask children, what makes you feel safe?

♥ Review safety practices with children that promote safety during times of need.

♥ Consider making kits of sorts for each child and in it are things that bring comfort. This could be a stuffed animal, a favorite book, encouraging notes, etc. This could be a great group project! Actively engaging children in a hands-on activity will promote a sense of empowerment at a time when it is likely very much needed.

## Rest

☰ Create a space, corner or similar area where kids can go as a retreat. Fill this with sensory items and other objects that children may find soothing.

☰ Partner with children in creating a way for them to signal to you they may need rest. This could be a code word, some sort of sign with their hands, anything that promotes consistent communication. Providing these comfort zones during this stage of PTSD response will give children a place to safely be when things are getting a bit too stressful!



## W.E.L.L.

Children have their own unique way of experiencing a disaster or trauma and they are not just smaller versions of adults. Adding to that each person is his or her own and will have a unique perspective on what happened. This makes it imperative that adults recognize when maybe something is becoming too much for a child to handle. W.E.L.L. stands for Warning Signs, Extra Time, Limitations and Love.

### Warning Signs

- ⊙ Remember to check-in with children and where they are at with things using the Feelings Thermometer presented in the first section of this tool kit. Another way to assess how a child is feeling is to consider having a cut-out face by their names in a cubby where the facial expressions can easily be changed by children to reflect how they feel. You may also wish for children to make faces of different emotions on paper plates and attach them to popsicle sticks so that they may raise the one that corresponds to their current emotion.
- ⊙ Remember that younger children in particular may not tell you with their words how they are feeling, but this can often be seen through non-verbal gestures. For example, withdrawing from normally enjoyed activities, their facial expressions, etc. Keep a watchful eye out for subtle cues that you as the provider will notice is different!

### Extra Time

- + It's OK to take additional time as needed for tasks and it's further OK to go back and repeat a part of this toolkit! It does not mean failure or you didn't do something right, it means life is happening and it cannot always be predicted! Don't forget yourself in all of this, do something nice for yourself, take that time!
- + Who wouldn't love to add time to their day or to go back to a time where things were wonderful? Play a game with children (or individually) and ask them, if you had an extra 10 minutes on your day, what would you like to do, how would you spend it? If you could go back to another time, where would you go, what would you be doing? This may help kids to express their thoughts and what they need in a way that is non-threatening and fun.

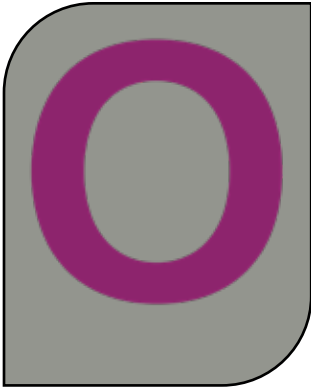
### Limits and Love

- ☺ You may be tempted to put rules and expectations on pause given whatever it is that has occurred, but children need this structure and consistency to feel secure. This is not to say that there should not be some flexibility. Use your best judgment! Consider at this time using an "earn back system." If a child has had a rough morning make a way for him or her to turn things around and for him or her not to think that the entire day is "done" because of a mistake early on. This might look like recognizing when they have done something well or were kind to another.
- ☺ Physical touch can mean different things to different people. Some children may be comforted by a hug while others when they are upset would not see it this way. Use your best judgment and what you know about each individual child.

😊 You can show love and care in many ways. Consider a “high five” when something has gone well or maybe have a “treasure box” where children may select an item as a reinforcer for positive actions. This does not have to be a toy, maybe it could be a slip of paper that says “5 minutes of game time” or another special treat.

## Next Step Prep

Remember to ask children, have them draw a picture of what they think they need, or cut out pictures, anything that gives them a means by which to convey to you what they believe they need or want, what would make things better? This is important because in the next section of the toolkit, O, or Ongoing Stress, Questions, How Can I Cope, is happening. This corresponds with the Rescue and Intrusive Stage of PTSD.

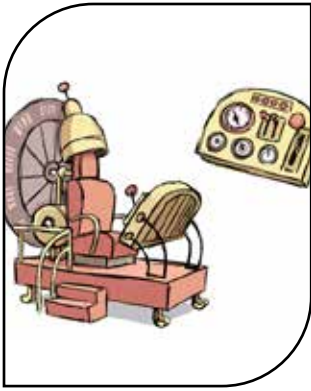


## (O)ngoing Stress, Questions, How Can I Cope/Rescue and Intrusive Stage

At this point in the toolkit, children have been experiencing a prolonged period of stress that may last indefinitely. With this stress may come a lot of questions. Is it going to happen again? Am I safe? Why did it happen? Being able to put a label on emotions and thoughts will help children to be able to communicate and develop emotional awareness. This section is designed to provide options for children in doing this, dealing with regressions in behavior or development, and further to respect that each child needs to show what his or her own


unique experience is with what has happened. It is equally as important that you as the provider be given as many tools and options to support your efforts as possible thus you will find additional links to such in this section.








# The Time Machine


Children may be experiencing thoughts and worries that are interfering with their day-to-day functioning. Regression and fantasies of escaping to an alternate place and time or to be someone else is not uncommon. These fantasies may be a means of escaping a specific situation however, an over-reliance on such impedes progress and can create further distress. The Time Machine will help to turn fantasies into healthy realities!


 Ask children or have them write their responses to the following: If you could make a time machine and go back to a different time and place, what would that loOK like? Why do you want to go there?

 Consider having children make a time machine out of what is available. This could be an old oatmeal container, an empty Kleenex box, a shoe box, etc. Their creation could serve as something isible, tangible, and a place to store later parts of this activity.

 Engage children in ongoing discussion about their initial responses to the first question (see above). Help them to make visible what they are saying with their words. This may be in the form of a picture or some other type of creation. From this try to identify key words that you notice are themes. For example, “safe” or “happy.” Write these key words on slips of paper and put them into the time machine. Explain that these slips of paper give the time machine the fuel it needs to blast off, work, etc.

 Consider having children share their time machines and what is giving them the fuel that they need to work. By sharing in a group format may help other children to hear that they are not alone in their thinking!

 In keeping with the time machine theme and after some “fuel” slips and discussions have occurred, explain that it is time (no pun intended) for the time machine to come back to the present but, it needs more fuel! This is the point at which you begin to transition children back to the present but take what they have said and figure out how to make it a reality. For instance, if a child’s “fuel slip” mentioned “safe,” what would make you feel “safe” now? Put these things on the new “fuel slips” so that the time machine can return to the present!

 Using for example, “safe,” discuss, write, draw, etc. what specifically would make children feel safe again? As you identify what specifically these things mean, consider having children make them into “medals” for their time machines and place it on them or in their respective time machines. Try to incorporate the things children have said they need into the environment as much as possible. Don’t forget to share the time machines with parents so they can know what their children are thinking!

# It's All in The Cards



When children, or anyone is experiencing ongoing stress, they need options for relief! Who doesn't want to be rescued or to escape from something that has quickly become too much to deal with? Remember that children are not simply miniature adults and they do not process nor respond to stress like adults. Children are their own unique people and because of this they need solutions that focus on their incredible imaginations and are creative enough to hold their attentions. It's All in The Cards will help to meet this need.

- Consider what size of deck you may want to have children make. This may differ from child to child and that is OK! Some children may need more options or simply enjoy a greater variety. Having children make these cards provides them with a hands on experience and helps to make them feel like they are proactive and not helpless.
- The notion behind the deck is to give children options for dealing with ongoing stress and giving them the power to choose what they feel they need at a particular point in time. You may want to look at websites that specifically discuss yoga and mindfulness for children to get ideas of specific things that you can suggest children may want to consider putting on a card! You could even make a game of it and challenge children to come up with five or however many cards. Participants could then earn a sticker or a token that could be exchanged for something later on.
- Children can draw a picture of something that makes them happy and use a card for example to reflect on when they are needing that escape. Cards might have a riddle or something else that makes that child laugh or smile.
- Children could possibly share their cards in a group format to foster a sense of community and spark ideas in other children. Everyone's deck will be a unique reflection of what works for him or her!
- Encourage use of the cards both when you see a child struggling and at other times. It is important that children do not see using their cards as like "pulling a card" that they may have had to do in the past when a misbehavior or something similar occurred. You may wish to make your own deck of cards or talk about what might be in your own deck so that children see that you are modeling the desired response. It is hoped that children will on their own come to want to use their deck of cards but they may need a little encouragement from you especially in the beginning. The decks of cards can be modified at any time based on ideas and needs and are something that can easily be transported from setting to setting.



## Balancing Act

With prolonged periods of stress in children, it is very easy for the “scales” to be tipped in the direction of developmental regressions and negative behaviors that may not have previously been seen. Visual representations especially ones where the scales are being tipped back into the right direction can serve as something tangible for children to see concretely that progress is being made!

- Have children draw a picture of a scale and write things that tip it in a negative way, positive way or both. Because seeing so many negative things tipping their scales at first can in itself have a negative impact on children, consider limiting things for example, write just one or two things at a time, or leave it open-ended and let children write what they decide they want to. If left open-ended it may be one way to see exactly where children are at in this point of the trauma that has occurred. If their scale, for example has many more negative things as opposed to peers, that would send a clear signal that particular child is needing more support right now. You know your children best!
- If children struggle to identify things that may tip their scales in a positive way, consider re-visiting other parts of this toolkit for ideas on how to help children identify these things. What is important is that children be incorporated as much as possible in identifying things that tip their scale in the positive direction to give them a sense of empowerment and involvement in what otherwise may seem like an out-of-control time.
- Scales can be repeated (re-drawn) as often as desired and especially to visually show kids that tangible, real progress is being made even if it may not feel like it. Seeing that scale change directions in a positive way is a concrete way of communicating progress to children. Remember to give children specific praise as their scales begin to change directions in a positive way and praise efforts even if major changes are not readily seen because all effort is effort and change takes time!
- To encourage progress, consider challenging children to add things to the positive side of the scale on a regular basis. Further encourage them to implement the ideas to tip the scale in a positive direction that were generated by them or in partnership with you! If needed, reinforce such actions with verbal praise/encouragement and/or something like extra computer time, more play time or even create a treasure box with inexpensive items children may pick from.



## Pictures Are Worth A Thousand Words

Every child experiences a traumatic event in his or her own unique way and while some may be vocal, many will not be. It is important to recognize that not all children will want to talk right now no matter how severe the stress may be becoming. Giving children options that meet them where they are at right now is important for their overall recoveries.

✍ Throughout this toolkit you have seen encouragement to use art as a means of communication. This gives children an alternative to verbal communication when they may not wish to speak or are unable to convey exactly what they are thinking and feeling with words. Consider giving them actual disposable cameras and ask them to take pictures of things that are meaningful or important to them in their worlds. This may form the basis for ongoing discussions about why they chose what they did and help to identify what their thoughts and feelings are (as they become more comfortable with the idea of verbalizing). Pictures could then be put into a scrapbook made by the child throughout the disaster or trauma recovery response. Alternatively, have children make scrap books and ask them to imagine if they had cameras in their hands with unlimited film, what would they take pictures of and why? Then have children draw this in their own scrapbooks.

✍ Murals are a great way for expressing a variety of emotions, something that is especially important for children trying to learn to cope with longer-term stress. Murals could be completed individually or as a group where each child draws a portion of the mural. The murals can have different themes or topics depending on what your specific needs are. For example, if there were a weather related disaster in your community, a mural might be themed around how can we feel safe or happy again.



## Read All About It

When you think about it, newspapers are a way that many of us find out things about the world that we live in. Newspapers can have both positive and some not so positive information about things that have happened but are important ways to know where things are at. Likewise, they may be a great way to know where children are at with what they have experienced and how it has changed how they see their respective world. It can also serve as a way for them to communicate thinking both good and bad about this stage of the disaster response.

☞ Have children create their own newspapers all about themselves. This may be a creative way for children to express themselves in a non-threatening/non-intimidating manner because they can decide what they do and do not “report” on. They can come up with a creative title for their newspapers and decide what events in their lives they wish to report on. Articles do not have to be like real articles in a standard newspaper, it can be just a sentence or two. You may further wish to encourage children to draw pictures with their articles to tell the story even more to those who may not know them. As with real newspapers, there can be many categories such as a Pet Section, a Home Section, etc. This can be an ongoing activity.

☞ As an alternative, you may wish to consider having children just write (or say) what the headlines would be if there were a newspaper about things happening in their lives and if willing/able to at that point, discuss more what they mean or consist of.



# Therapist's Toolkits

Sometimes in particular in the rescue and intrusive phase of the PTSD response in children, it becomes apparent that some children are needing more intervention than others. How a child experiences a trauma or disaster is always going to be unique to that child and many factors can impact how well or not well a child is able to cope. Having at your disposal resources beyond this toolkit is essential to ensuring that the needs of every child are met.

✂ Contact your local CMHC or Community Mental Health Center to discuss situations that you have encountered in your setting and ask for guidance.

You may look for who that is by conducting any online search or consulting a telephone directory. Additionally, each state has a Department of Mental Health that can further assist you in obtaining the support needed. For example in Missouri, you may go to the [Missouri Department of Mental Health](#) website to identify what local CMHC's are in your particular county.

Remember to involve parents or guardians in any discussions about concerns that you may have about a particular child and obtain any necessary ROI's or Releases of Information before sharing confidential information.

✂ Check out the [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) brochure for additional disaster response information in Missouri and hotline numbers.

✂ [SAMHSA](#) has a hotline for those needing additional support and resources after a disaster.

✂ Other excellent websites to check out are:

- [CDC Caring for Children in a Disaster](#)
- [Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- [Child Mind Institute](#)

## Next Step Prep

Ask children, when did you feel strong or powerful and what made you feel that way? This is important because in the next section of the toolkit, R or Regaining A Sense of Control is happening. This corresponds with the Short-Term/Intermediary Stage of PTSD.



## (R)egaining A Sense of Control/Short-term and Intermediary Stage

At this point in the toolbox, children who have experienced a disaster of some kind are less likely to be in denial of what happened but, they may still be experiencing intrusive thoughts that impair their functioning, and are seeking relief. It is important to note again that children will progress through the stages of PTSD response in their own personal ways and it is not uncommon to see progress, then some regression, and then some more progress.

Overall, children may be experiencing a need to regain a sense of control and predictability at this point. You as the provider will also be looking to sustain what progress has been made and suggestions toward this can be found in this section. Along these lines, you may wish to look at, [“Ready Kids.”](#) In this you will find things such as, “Prepare with Pedro” which is another great way to assist children in the PTSD recovery process!



# Recipe Cards

Recipe cards, regardless of what they may be a recipe for, can serve as a means for children to regain that sense of control and predictability and help them to re-connect action with outcome.

☞ If you have access to a kitchen and the ingredients, actually making something to eat may be a great way for kids to begin to regain some sense of control. Here are some websites with very simple actual food recipes that children can make with supervision along with safety recommendations:

√ [14 Easy Meals Kids Can Make!](#)

√ [20 Easy Recipes to Make with Your Kids](#)

√ [34 Fun Dinner Ideas For Kids \(+ Recipes\)](#)

☞ If you do not have access to a kitchen and ingredients for a traditional recipe card, no problem! What's important here is not that at all, what's important is that children are making the connection between their taking action and it having a positive outcome! In doing so, children can begin to regain that needed sense of control, that they are not helpless. Additionally, recipe cards no matter what they are for can provide a much needed and fun diversion from whatever stressful situation is present! Consider making your own recipe cards with children and have them play them out for the group! For example:

√ How to Make Someone Laugh or Smile

√ How to Be A Good Friend

√ How to Draw A \_\_\_\_\_

√ How to Be Happy

☞ There are many different kinds of disasters and each will likely need its own specific supplies. For example, in the COVID-19 pandemic, masks and antibacterial soaps were among the many items in high-demand. Consider having children make supplies that are in some way related to the event. Here are a few examples to get you started:

√ Make a mask! For more information on this please refer to:

[How to Make Coronavirus Face Masks With Your Kids](#)

√ Make soap! For more information about this please refer to:

[Homemade Kid-Friendly Foaming Hand Soap](#)

[Simple Preschool Soap-Making Fun for the Classroom](#)





## Disaster Master Game

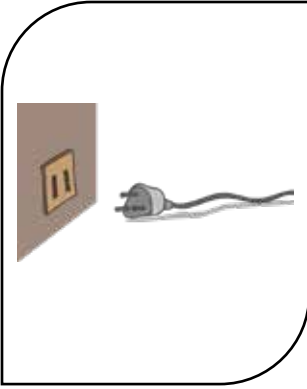
At this point in PTSD recovery, children are further adjusting to their circumstances, the “new normal.” Part of this adjustment is regaining a sense of control and finding the right combination, which works and what does not!

- Have children draw a safe or make one using a box, construction paper, etc. On individual slips of paper, have the children write four or five things that they believe will bring them comfort (you may need to assist them with this and/or use earlier parts of the tool kits). When they feel like they need that additional support verbally and perhaps otherwise (e.g., a sticker), reinforce

the children to go to their respective safes and pull out a slip of paper and try what is written. If it works, it’s the right combination. If it does not help them, the slip is the wrong combination right now and can be set aside but, do not throw it away! Encourage children to continue to add slips to their safes so that they are increasing their options during times of need. By being able to select what they use during difficult times will instill in children a sense of some control.

- Any slips of paper from the exercise above that were set aside will be needed for this section. Punch a hole in each slip and combine them using string, yarn, etc. Explain to the children that the slips are like keys and they unlock certain locks but not others. In other words the keys will help in some situations but not others. Keys (slips) can be exchanged with those in the safe depending upon the situation.

# Power Play



Staying plugged in is important to sustaining long-term results! The barriers to this progress may result in disconnections. The good news is that things can be reconnected and made stronger than ever!

✦ In the previous exercise, children identified things that they believed may bring them comfort but in this exercise, just the opposite. Have children draw a power cord or take some string or yarn for this activity. Any length is fine. If using a drawn power cord, have children along their cord identify things that may break the connection (e.g., fear, sadness, etc.) and write that on the actual

picture. If using yarn or string, on individual slips of paper, have children write these same things that may break or fray the connection and then punch a hole in the slips and attach them along the string/yarn. Children may need assistance in identifying obstacles to their ongoing progress.

✦ Taking the picture or “power cord” from above, have children “repair” their “frayed connections” by “rewiring.” One way this is accomplished is by drawing a new power cord above the old one and for each potential disconnect, identify a way it may be repaired. In other words, what do you need to feel safe or happy again? If using the yarn/string option, write what the repair may be on the blank side of the slip of paper.

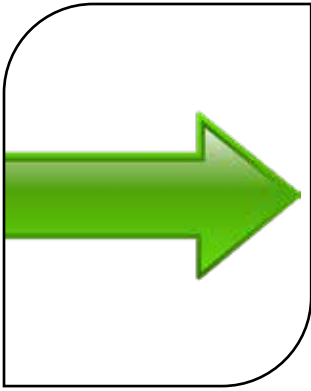
## Next Step Prep

To prepare for the next section, ask children or have them draw; what do you hope will happen next and why? The next section in the toolkit focuses on, “Now What” and corresponds with the Long-term Recovery stage of the PTSD response. In this section you will learn about how children can be active participants in future disaster preparedness. His participation not only helps children to build on the skills that they have learned here, it also positions them to feel further empowered with a sense of control. Both of these factors are needed in ongoing successful responses of children to PTSD.



## (N)ow What Happens/Long-term Recovery Stage

Whew, what a long journey this has been for you and the children that you serve! Give yourself a high five because this has not been easy on anyone! While navigating your own emotions and challenges about whatever it is that has occurred you stayed the course and were a PHENOMENAL resource to some of life's most precious gifts, children! You might be asking, so what do I do now? At this point in the recovery process, you may wish to focus on promoting resiliency and helping to further reinforce a sense of control and normalcy in children. This section will give you ideas of how to accomplish this and help children to see that they can be active participants in their world and have a positive impact regardless of age. In doing so, you are showing them that no matter what happens, they can persevere and emerge from difficult situations, successfully. Preparedness for the future is not instilling a sense of fear in children but rather teaching them that while some situations are unavoidable, the best course of action is always to be as well-prepared as possible. Doing so mitigates to some extent how stressful a situation can be knowing that you at least are confronting it with some sort of plan!



## Now What Happens?

At this point in the toolkit, recovery especially long-term recovery does not always follow a linear path. It is not uncommon for children while trying to recover from a disaster or trauma to revert to an earlier stage in the PTSD response. You may wish to revisit an earlier section in this toolkit if needed and that is OK! Fortunately, there are some additional things that you can do to increase the chances for a successful recovery!

- Have children make, “The Kid Kit.” These can be made using boxes or something similar. These could be first aid kits or some other kind of kit. The kits could even be donated to a local shelter and be done individually or as a group all collecting supplies. Note that even having children write a short note and/or draw a picture could mean the world to someone else who is hurting! This exercise shows children they can play an active role and have an impact in the world. Empowering children with this sense can aide in the process of their own recovery because the feelings of being helpless diminish.
- Consider having children make posters to increase awareness about a kind of disaster. This will give children the opportunity to express themselves in a non-threatening/intimidating, creative manner. Additionally, it will give you a better idea of where the children are insofar as their thoughts and perspectives.
- Children need to see a positive future as being possible in order to have greater chances for positive outcomes. Try playing the “Picking Up The Pieces” game. This is a game that helps to encourage affective expression in children as well as ongoing discussions about things that may help in recovery. This can be done individually or as a group activity. For example, if working one-on-one with a child, have him or her write on slips of paper, positive and not so positive feelings he or she may have experienced or is still experiencing. Gather the slips of paper and throw them up into the air. Have the child pick up a piece and either talk about what that slip meant or means to him or her or draw a picture if he/she is not very verbal at this point. This free expression will further help you to meet him or her where he or she is at in that moment! Further this will continue to foster an open conversation about feelings and things that help bring about more positive emotions. As things progress the “pieces” can be added to based on needs and eventually “all picked up” to concretely show that life has moved on in a good way.
- Promoting resiliency after trauma or a disaster of some sort is a key component to long-term recovery. One way to do this with younger children is to liken it to building muscles or a healthy body. The muscles get bigger and the body gets healthier by learning and doing new things. Each child could have a drawing of a body or this could be done as a group exercise. It could even be done on large sheets of paper for more room to write! As an added idea, children could have their own shape traced on the sheets of paper and add all of the ideas of what they think goes into being healthy and positive. This could serve as the basis for discussion and more ideas generated and added.

# Acknowledgments

This toolkit was created by members of the Children and Youth in Disasters (CYID), a subgroup of the Community Disaster Resiliency Network (CDRN). The toolkit can be used in whole or in parts. It is meant to be used by non-professionals preschool to early elementary age and does not replace therapy. Older children who function at a lower level may also benefit from this material. The committee is considering future trainings to accompany the toolkit. Special thanks goes to Jennifer L. L'Heureux, Ph.D.; Carol Ayers; and members of the CYID committee.

© Mid-America Regional Council 2022 V1



600 Broadway, Suite 200  
Kansas City, Missouri 64124

Email: [marcinfo@marc.org](mailto:marcinfo@marc.org)  
Phone: 816-474-4240