

The Weight Our Kids Carry: Understanding Trauma & How Relationships Help Kids Heal

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Children's brains grow through **experience**. Every interaction builds neural pathways. The experiences that happen most often become the **paths their brain uses the most**.

The brain develops from the bottom up:

- Safety & survival first
- Emotions & relationships
- Thinking, planning, and self-control

When children experience trauma their brains adapt for survival:

- Always watching for danger
- Reacting quickly (fight, flight, freeze, fawn)
- Stress hormones interfere with thinking and self-control

These behaviors are not bad – they are **survival responses**.

HOW TRAUMA MAY SHOW UP

Trauma lives in the brain, healing happens in relationships.

- **Young Children (0-5)**
 - Sensitive to noise or touch, fear of separation, confusion about who is safe, strong startle responses.
- **School-Age (6-12)**
 - Mood swings, trouble focusing, anxiety, acting younger than their age, attention-seeking.
- **Teens (13-21)**
 - Risk-taking, aggression, trouble planning for the future, over—or under—reacting to danger.

WHAT KIDS WITH TRAUMA CRAVE MOST

Children crave **healthy, reliable relationships**.

They need to experience adults who are:

- **Consistent:** "I'm here for you every day."
- **Responsive:** "Tell me what's going on. I'm listening."
- **Attentive:** "I care about you and what matters to you."
- **Validating:** "Your feelings make sense."
- **Empathetic:** "I see how this is hard for you."
- **Supportive problem-solvers:** "Let's figure this out together."

AVOID POWER STRUGGLES

Kids with trauma often fight for control because they once felt powerless.

1. Pick Your Battles

- a. Safety and health → always a firm boundary
- b. Everything else → decide what truly matters

Not everything needs to be a fight. Sometimes peace is better than being right.

2. Don't Make "No" Your Default

- a. Instead of "No," try: "Yes—after..."
- b. This teaches patience, self-control, and trust
- c. It creates win-wins instead of battles

3. Keep Things Predictable

- a. Clear rules + consistent follow-through = safety
- b. Kids relax when they know what to expect

4. Refuse to Argue

- a. Arguing teaches kids to fight harder
- b. Calm voices teach kids how to calm themselves
- c. If it's getting heated:
 - i. Pause
 - ii. Step Away
 - iii. Come back when everyone is calmer

5. Before a Battle, Ask Yourself

- a. Is this about safety?
- b. Had the expectation been clear?
- c. Am I calm?
- d. Can we compromise?
- e. What would happen if I let this go?

BE THE THERMOSTAT, NOT THE THERMOMETER: Set the emotional tone.

SAY LESS, LISTEN MORE: Connection calms the brain.

FIND THE "YES": Offer choices and options.

KEEP YOUR COOL: Your calm builds their calm.

HAVE A PLAN: Predictability builds safety.

Every calm moment, every kind response, every consistent boundary adds something new to your child's "suitcase."

You are helping replace fear with **SAFETY, CONFIDENCE, AND LOVE.**

That's how healing happens.

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