

CIRCLE TIME!

A TRAUMA - INFORMED Activity Guide



BY: Alycia Pinizzotto

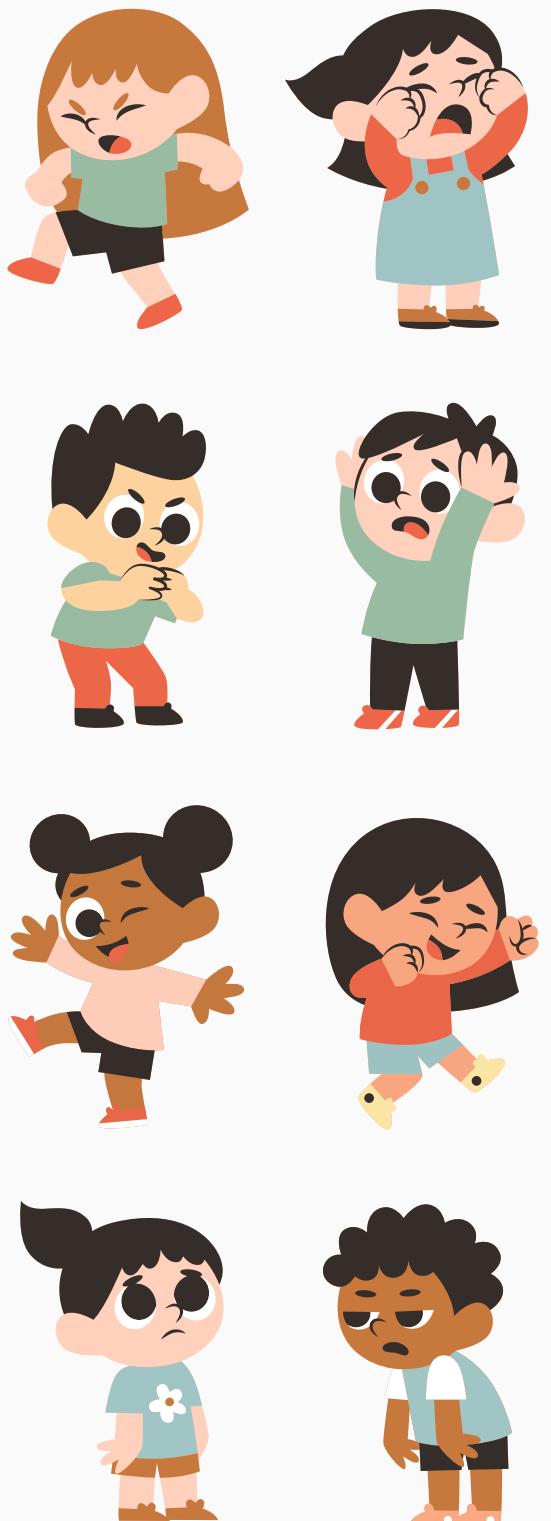
The following guide is an adaptation of the concepts and therapeutic modalities introduced through TBRI™ “nurture groups” ([Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development Website](#)). Please make use of the full “nurture group” guide, as provided by Back2Back ministries ([Nurture Group Guide](#)), as well as Story’s adaptive guide (below.) It is written for parents and includes supplies list, scripts, and anecdotal extras.



I've been trying to figure out how to change the world or even reduce suffering by like maybe 1% for as long as I can remember. All my big ideas have usually come up short. That is, until I stumbled upon this one thing that caught my attention - *what about giving kids space to feel?*

But actually.

- *What about not shushing tantrums but leaning in with curiosity and gentleness?*
- *What about giving grown-up language for the complex emotions and realities of childhood?*
- *What about teaching children to live fully present in their bodies and resisting the urge to distract them with a screen when they are "whining" or "off?"*
- *What about giving them all the safety and space in the world to say - this is how this feels - no matter how uncomfortable it makes us, the adults, feel?*
- *And then what about teaching them to create that same space for others?*



I don't know if it would change the world, but I know it would definitely, without a doubt, change THE WORLD.

That's probably more dramatic of an intro than you bargained for when you downloaded this free guide off of a random nonprofit's website... but I mean it.

(As a mom and as someone who has extensively studied trauma, child development, and a wide array of therapeutic interventions for children and youth).

I believe there is something incredibly powerful, in this simple family "ritual" or routine. In my home, it's called "Circle Time."

I first began doing "circle time" when my oldest was just over 1 year old. With only slight adaptations of the activities you see outlined below, I have also implemented "circle time" with my teen foster placements.



I think of it like this:
CIRCLE TIME has
5 primary goals

1. CONNECT
2. CONNECT
3. CONNECT
4. Build an environment of felt SAFETY
5. Teach emotional regulation and relational skills through PLAY

PREP WORK!

Conversations.

Have a conversation with your children about why you want to do this:

Toddlers/young children:

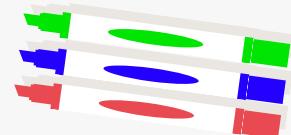
"I have a fun idea of something we could do together." (that's pretty much all you have to say at this stage and they will be there with bells on) But you could add "As you're growing, I want to make sure you understand your body, your brain, and all the different things you might be feeling. Will you play some games with me?"

Older children:

"I want to make sure I get time with you every day/every week - it matters to me how you feel and what you think about. I want you to know me too. This will help us stay connected and be more honest with each other - can we try this together? Even if it feels a little weird at first?"

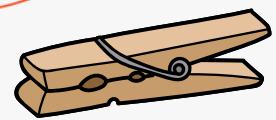
SUPPLIES

PAPER PLATES



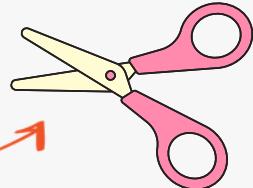
A GREEN,
RED, AND
BLUE MARKER

CLOTHESPINS
(OPTIONAL)



STUFFED ANIMALS,
DOLLS, OR ACTION
FIGURES (ETC...)

SCISSORS



BAND-AIDS

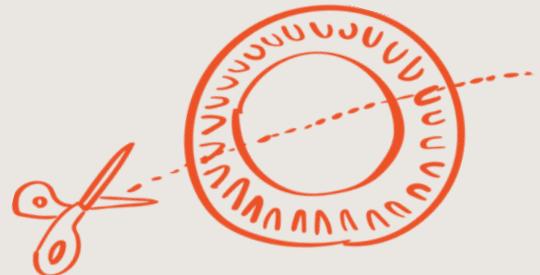
chocolate chips,
mini marshmallows, etc...

SMALL
TREATS

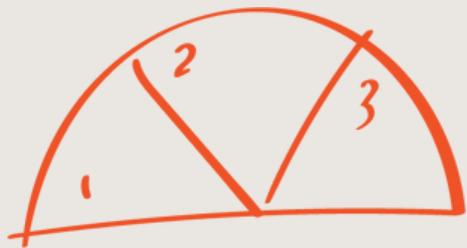


CREATING THE EMOTIONAL MOTOR

1. Cut or fold a paper plate in half (obviously cardboard or other materials would work just fine)



2. Divide the semi-circle into three even sections



3. Color the left section blue, the middle section green, and the right section red



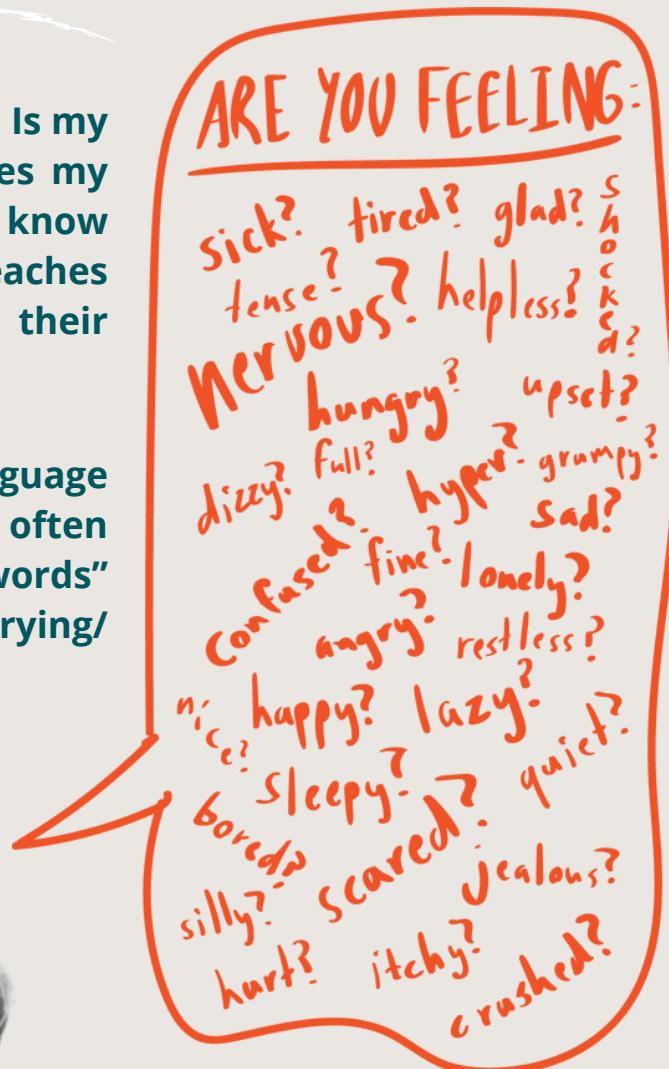
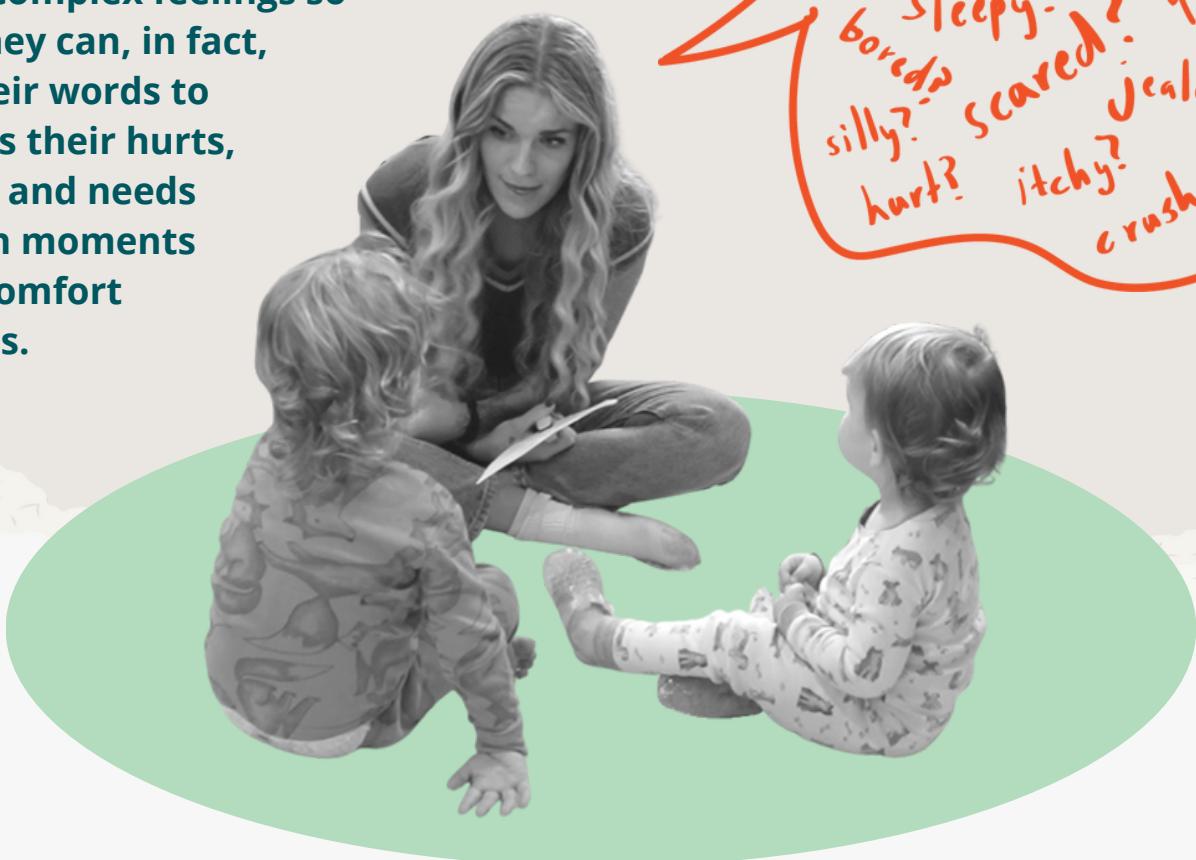
Note: it is a great idea to have your children help create the motor. You can even have each child create their own and get creative with it.

CIRCLE TIME OUTLINE

Emotional Check-In

Establish the practice of pausing to *notice*. Is my heart racing? What does that mean? Does my body feel sluggish? Am I sad but don't know why? This is the art of mindfulness and teaches children (and adults) to live presently in their bodies and in the moment.

This part of the activity gives children language to express what they are feeling. So often adults encourage children to "use their words" to express what they want/feel vs. crying/acting out. What we sometimes forget it to teach them the words for those complex feelings so that they can, in fact, use their words to express their hurts, wants, and needs to us in moments of discomfort or crisis.



CHECKING IN

1. "Thank you so much for taking this time to be together today. I know we've been busy today and I would love to take a minute for us to actually listen to our bodies and brains to see how they are feeling today. Sometimes we have to get really quiet to notice the feelings in our body, otherwise we might miss the little messages they are trying to tell us. Let's take a second to breathe and listen."

2. Encourage everyone to take 3-5 deep breaths, with you guiding the inhale and exhale time (*note: my toddlers used to laugh during this part and now it is their favorite part of our time together and they take it very seriously - don't give up if it doesn't go well the first time*).

3. Introduce the emotional motor. Explain that our bodies, just like cars, have "motors" Sometimes they get too hot - sometimes they get too cold, and sometimes there's just something off or a weird noise. But if we don't pay attention to the motor for a long time - our car could start to break down. The same thing happens if we ignore our body's motor.

4. Explain, using developmentally appropriate language, that our body's motors can get "out of whack" or dysregulated by our emotions or physical sensations. It is okay and normal to experience these emotions and feelings but it's important to learn to recognize them so we don't get stuck there and eventually bring ourselves back to a place of regulation - the "green" area in the middle of our motor.

- *The blue area of the emotional motor (far left) represents emotions or feelings or boredom, fatigue, apathy, sadness, or just feeling "blue."*
- *The green area (middle) represents a calm and regulated state (usually referring to emotions like happy, content, satisfied, "normal")*
- *The red area (far right) represents over-stimulation, hyperness, anxiety, anger, fear, frustration, jealousy, etc.*

5. In an organized way, invite (but never force) everyone in the group to ask the person sitting next to them how they are feeling in that moment (or how they have been feeling during that day.) Children may place a clothes pin (or simply point) to the area of the motor they most identify.

- *Younger kids are often able to identify the general concept of the colors before they can verbalize the actual emotions and may say something like "I'm blue"*
- *It is always okay (and a good idea) to give the child space to talk about why they might be feeling sad or angry or jealous. It is never a good idea to force or pressure further explanation. Even if a child just points to a color and never verbalizes anything, always affirm the level of vulnerability they are offering by stating "thank you so much for sharing that with me"*

As the facilitator,
make sure to
PARTICIPATE.
Modeling is one of the most
powerful tools you have in
this activity.
(and in general)



ROLEPLAY ACTIVITY

Oftentimes, adults choose to “parent” or teach when a problem arises. Example: two siblings are fighting over a toy and becoming increasingly upset. In the moment, the adult tries to explain the concept of sharing and becomes frustrated when it feels like neither child is listening. And the reality is they are not. In moments of extreme emotional dysregulation, children do not always have full access to the part of their brain that controls executive functioning (ie; reasoning.) So no, the tantrum is not the time for teaching. The time for teaching is in a fun, regulated, playful moment.

Through roleplay activities, adults can clearly establish expectations for the children in their care in a way that is much more digestible for the child. Role play gives the child the chance to actually “practice” the desired behavior, thus creating muscle and brain memory for it. (example below)

If a correction or teaching method is not “preventative” in nature, it is not fair. You would never send your child to a baseball game if they had never once attended a practice. In the same way, we should consider the consequences of sending our kids to play dates, family dinner parties, daycares or other potentially overwhelming situations without practicing safe and appropriate responses and behaviors.

You can make teaching moments with your children easier by practicing them in a **FUN** way when they are in a CALM emotional state.



LET'S PRACTICE!

*this can be a great opportunity to practice things like sharing and patience.

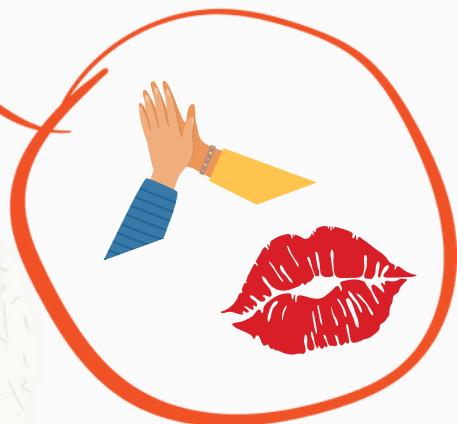
1. Choose a behavior or scenario that you want your child to work on (maybe something you have seen them struggling with, like sharing toys or interrupting others) or a situation you want them to be prepared for. Example: you have family visiting from out of town and you want to walk through a couple of hypothetical situations to help your child/children prepare for those interactions.

(Note: for younger children, I suggest using props/dolls/figurines for this portion of the activity - it keeps them interested for much longer.)

EXAMPLE - "You guys know that grandma and grandpa are coming to town next weekend. How are you feeling about that?" - highlight for them that it's okay to feel more than one thing at once (maybe both nervous and excited).

"Everyone likes to say hello differently. Grandma likes to give a lot of kisses and grandpa can sometimes be quiet. Let's practice different ways of saying hello that make YOU feel comfortable and can still make our guests feel welcome."

You can run through different scenarios and address any concerns the children have about. Practice giving high fives or hugs as greetings. Have them practice using language like "is it okay if i give you a hug instead, grandma" - this is extremely empowering and can reduce anxiety when/if a situation arises.



2. You could discuss ways for your children to find space for themselves if they need a moment away from guests. Have them actually practice both “disrespectful” and “respectful” ways to do this. IE: disrespectful - ignoring guests and playing on the iPhone (make this portion fun and silly if you can, add some drama) vs respectful - asking if they can go to their room for a bit or go on a walk.

Focus on simple, repeatable phrases that you can reference in real-time as situations arise. One I use often is “*with kind words, please*.” A theme we frequently revisit in my home is how to use kind words even when frustrated or overwhelmed. So we role-play scenarios where my children have the opportunity to compare kind words vs. not so kind words. When a situation arises where maybe my children arguing over a toy, I can prompt them with “do you want to try that again with kind words” and they have experiential memory of what those kind words are and how it feels to use them.

There should be 1-2 main takeaways from this portion of the activity and you should repeat them OFTEN.



"HURTS" CHECK IN

Some children might not relate to the concept of the emotional motor that we used at the beginning of our time together or maybe they just don't quite have the language yet to express specific emotions.

Most everyone, though, understands the concept of a "hurt", an "ouchy", a "boo-boo" (whatever it is you call it with your people).

By asking children the question "*Do you have any "hurts" today?*", you are offering your child an additional opportunity to reflect on how the sensations and realities of their physical bodies as well as their emotional state. Every time we encourage our children to "pause" and think about questions like this, we are teaching and modeling mindfulness.

1. "Before we end our time together today, I want to ask everybody a few more questions. And remember, this is a safe space (in my home, I have this posted on my wall and refer to it often during circle time) - just like we protect and respect each other's bodies and keep everyone safe, we will protect and respect each other's words too.

2. Proceed to ask the child next to you if they have any "hurts" they are comfortable sharing about. Explain that a "hurt" can be an "outside" hurt like a skinned knee, a tummy ache, or a stuffy nose. Or a hurt can be an "inside" hurt like a sad heart or confused mind. This is an opportunity for children who are maybe less verbal to simply point to their hurt.

3. Once a child identifies a "hurt", respond with "I am so sorry that hurts you." At this point, I always offer a bandaid (we go through a lot of bandaids) as a symbolic way of offering care and acknowledging the hurt. For an inside hurt, for example, you can place a bandaid on the child's heart.



Important note: Unless a child is obviously looking to further engage in conversation, I recommend not "pushing" for more information at this stage. As a parent/caretaker, there is a natural desire to want to "fix" your child's hurt. In most cases, it is just as significant, if not more, to simply acknowledge and empathize with their hurt. Doing so will establish trust and leave the door open for further discussion as these conversations become more natural/habitual in everyday life.

4. Encourage each child in the group to ask the person next to them the same question:

"Do you have any hurts today?"

"Can I offer you a bandaid?"

(always look for the ask and consent exchange)

"I'm sorry that hurts you."



TREATS!

Everybody loves treats, right? As a concrete way to signal the end of our time together, I always bring a small, fun "treat" to share with everyone. I'm talking like a single goldfish for everyone in the group, a single chocolate chip, something simple.

"Would You Like A
Chocolate Chip
Today?"



The point is not to make it "the point." This provides another opportunity for giving and receiving care.

1. Distribute the item to each member of the circle. Let them know that the "treat" they are holding is not actually for them, but for the person next to them.

2. You start by passing the item in your hand to the person next to you and saying something encouraging like "thanks for sharing today" or "I'm happy you're here."

3. One by one, encourage each child to offer their treat to the child next to them.

Especially for young children, this is a small but significant exercise in self control and patience (especially if they are the last to receive their item), an opportunity to practice "nurturing" others, and simply an upbeat way to end the activity.



BREATHE!

Note: Depending on the attention span of the group, there are plenty of additional activities that can be built into this time.

When my children are being especially attentive or maybe have had an emotionally turbulent couple of days, I make sure to fit in some regulation activities like these child-friendly breath work activities:

- “Blow on your soup” - have the child imagine that they are holding a bowl of very hot soup. Have them cup their hands like a bowl and bring it up close to their mouth. Have them “blow” on their soup slowly until it cools off.
- “Stuffed animal roller coaster” - Have your child lay down on their back and put a stuffed animal on their belly. Have them breathe in to move the stuffed animal up, then breathe out to bring the stuffed animal back down. This helps teach kids to use their whole diaphragm to take big deep breaths vs shallow breaths.

***Deep breathing increases the supply of oxygen to your brain and stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system (our “rest and digest” mode), promoting relaxation and a return to equilibrium.**

It's amazing how, with time, you will see this language and these exchanges transform the way your children interact with each other, you, and others.

Recently, my toddler saw me biting my nails and asked if I was okay. I responded, “yes, I’m okay bud, why?” “You are biting your hands - are you anxious, mommy?” (yes, he’s three) “I guess I am a little anxious, bud. I’m not really sure why.” “I’m sorry you’re feeling anxious, mommy.” And that was the end of the interaction and it was healing.

I once did “circle time” with a mixture of my toddlers, my foster teen, and a house guest. During the hurts portion of the activity, the foster teen placed a bandaid on my house guest’s heart (this house guest had recently lost her husband to suicide.)

With almost no words spoken, there was a powerful exchange of healing between two people who had lost much and maybe didn’t have many answers, but simply saw and acknowledged each other’s pain.



"Never underestimate
the basic human
NEED for
connection"

FAQS

Q: What if my kids laugh and think this is weird?

A: Lean in with curiosity. Why do they think it's weird? Does it make them feel anxious? Is it too childish? Does it feel forced? Have that conversation. And then explain that this is new for you too - model transparency by communicating any feelings of "weirdness" or anxiety you have about it as well. Start there.

Q. How often should I do this with my kids?

A: As often as they/ you would like. I originally thought I would implement this as part our weekly rhythm, maybe on one set night of the week. My kids prefer to do it much more frequently and sometimes request it nightly - especially if there has been a lot of change, visitors in town, etc.

Q. My kids are too old for this - they won't take it seriously.

A: Never underestimate the basic human need for connection - regardless of age. The first time I did circle time with a teenager, she snickered through the whole thing and had a very hard time taking it seriously. Only a few weeks later, at a dinner party with strangers (to her), she asked if the whole table wanted to do an emotional check-in and explained the concept of the emotional motor to a table full of adults who, just like she had done at first, snickered through the whole activity. Your kids are not too old and just might surprise you.