

# Responding to the Child's Experience of Trauma



Safety first, understand the child's experience, then caregiving in relationship

Presentation for child Aware Local Initiative Tuggeranong  
Oct 15 2014

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# Child Aware Local Initiative

- to embed and promote Child Aware Approaches across local organisations, communities, business and governments
- to address risk factors for child abuse and neglect, putting the child at the centre and improving the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children.
- National Framework:
  - Based on 'public health' model to prioritise universal supports for all families (for example, health and education) and more intensive (secondary) prevention interventions to families needing additional assistance with a focus on early intervention, and tertiary services as a last resort

# Trauma: What are we talking about?

## ➤ Definition of trauma: (Lenore Terr)

*NB Meaning attached to experience*

### ➤ Type I

➤ *Experience of or witnessing a life threatening event*

### ➤ Type II

➤ *Repeated exposure: chronic experiences of life threat*

## ➤ Essential features of trauma

➤ Overwhelms individual's perceived capacity to cope

➤ No perceived safety or protection available; *no one to help:*

➤ Unavailability of a protective other or

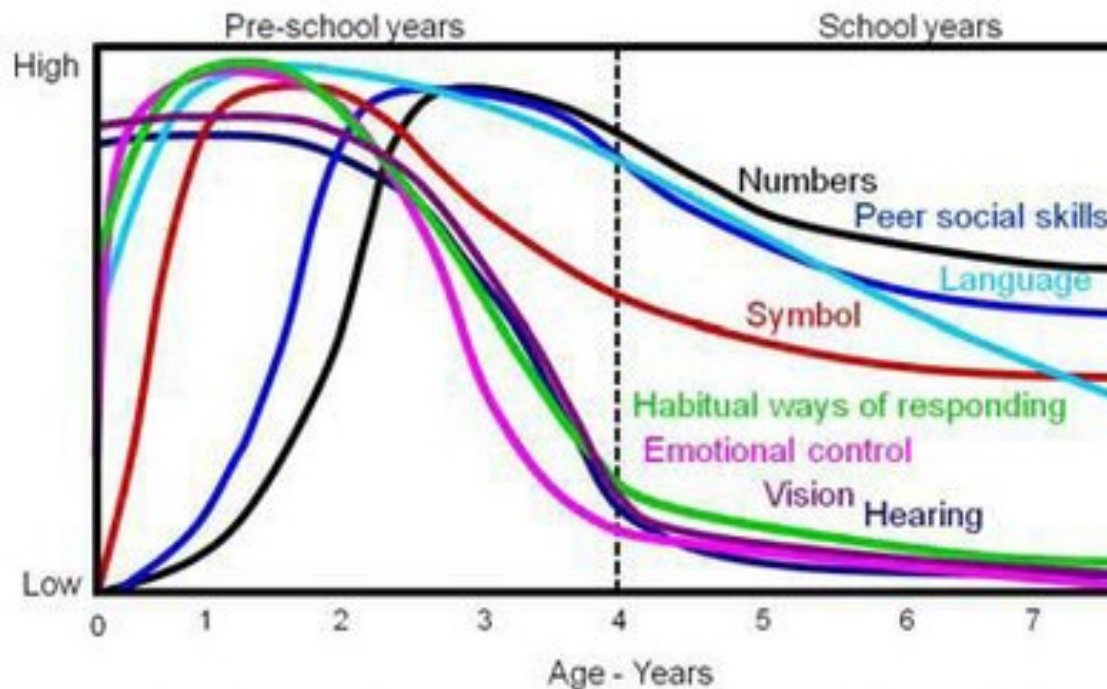
➤ Their perceived inability to protect or

➤ Protective person is also the source of danger

# Trauma in the context of childhood

- Development is happening-for better or worse

## Sensitive Periods in Early Brain Development



# Trauma in the Context of development

- Biological systems underpinning development are influenced by environment
- Caregiving relationships are the child's environment: first and foremost about protection
- When the person you need to protect you is the one who causes you the most fear: insoluble paradox
- Trauma in infancy and childhood can shape life outcomes (ACE study) "the body holds the score"
- When a child has already experienced trauma, responding effectively is a developmental emergency

# Trauma and stress

## **Positive**

Brief increases in heart rate,  
mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

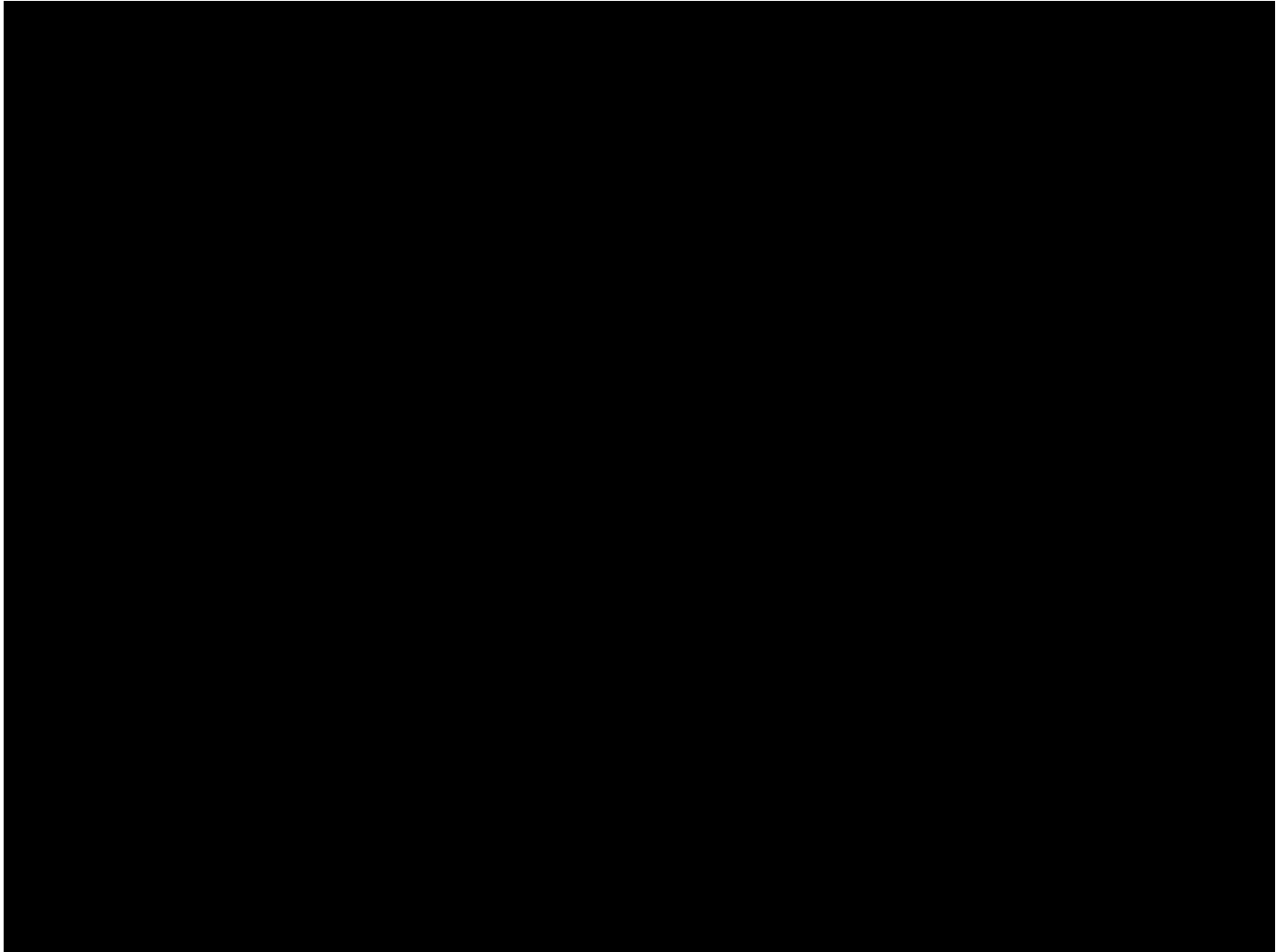
## **Tolerable**

Serious, temporary stress responses,  
buffered by supportive relationships.

## **Toxic**

Prolonged activation of stress response systems  
in the absence of protective relationships.

# The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development



# Safety First

- First and most critical need is to restore or establish experience of safety
- This may take some time, as the child may never have learned that it can be safe to trust an adult caregiver
- A caregiver's failure to protect, being frightened, or being frightening may be the source of threat to the child; a 'disabled' caregiver is life threatening
- DV, caregiver mental illness, substance abuse, emotional abuse and neglect may all be experienced as existential threats by the infant or child, as well as frank abuse



# Understand

- **First be aware of and seek support for own fear:** being frightened (weak or helpless) or frightening (punitive or threatening) will compound problem
- **Being with:**
  - the first need we all have is to feel understood-'someone gets my experience- I am not alone'
- This is inherently regulating and can bring down affect
- Problem solving can follow, when everyone is calm enough
  - Seeing and guessing
    - What do I see
    - What might the child need from me?
    - How might he/she be feeling?
    - Is he showing his need or hiding his need (acting like he needs something else)?

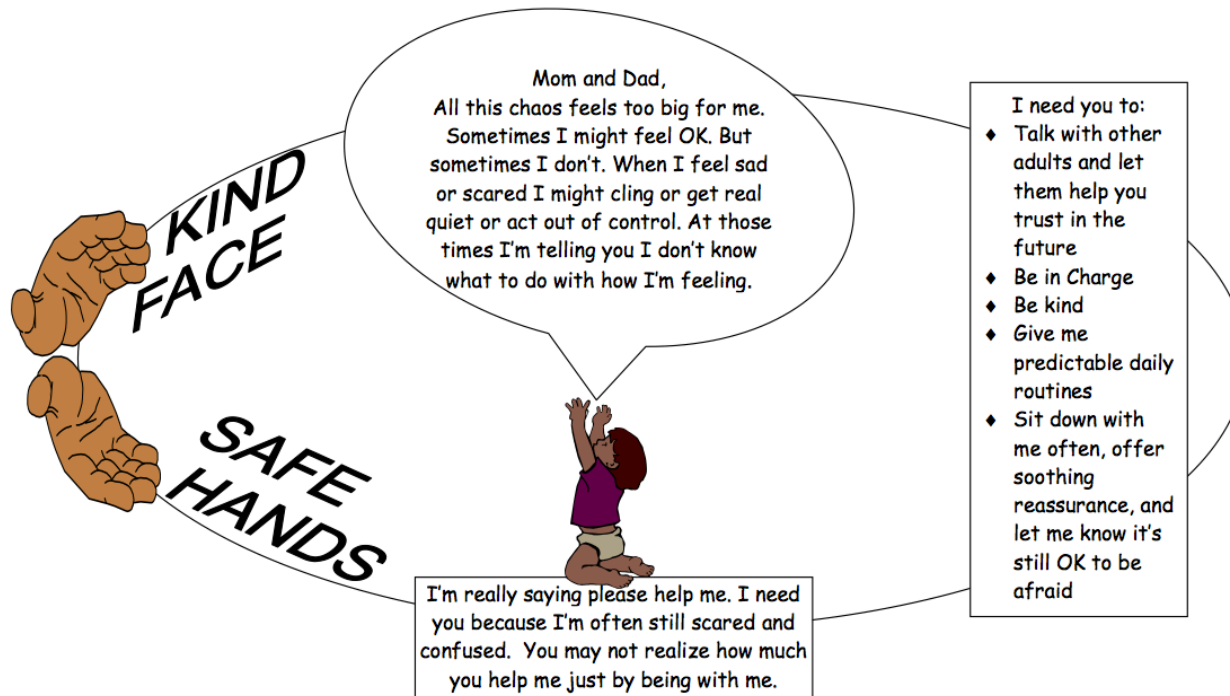
# Mobilise adequate caregiving relationships

- Strongest predictor of how well a child will do is how they are cared for, first by parent
- Adequately protective and responsive caregiving relationships can buffer against long term adverse outcomes (Sroufe et al, 2005 The development of a person)
- NB parent may also have own unprocessed trauma, loss, mental health problems, fear: need to address factors resulting in **disorganised caregiving**

# Re-establishing Trust in the relationship

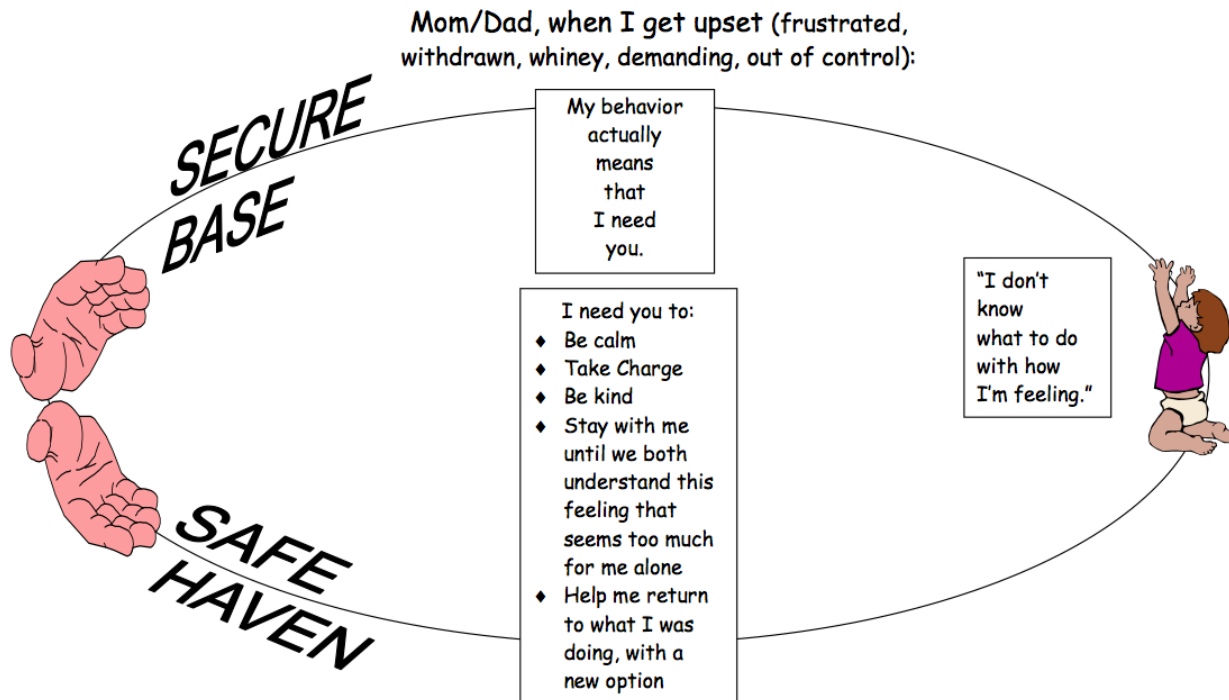
## CIRCLE OF TRUST

How to Help Your Child Feel Safe When Your Own World is Turned Upside Down



The Circle of Trust applies to children of all ages  
See: [www.circleofsecurity.org](http://www.circleofsecurity.org)

# Understanding

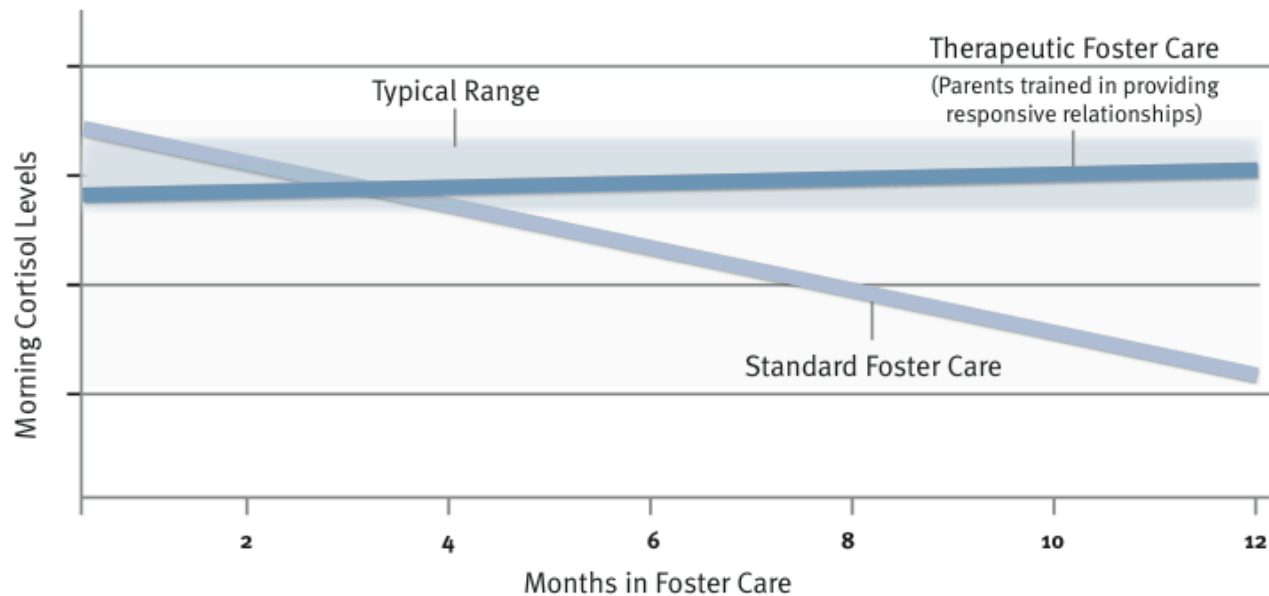


## CIRCLE OF REPAIR

Helping My Child Trust that Our Relationship  
Will (Almost) Always Set Things Right

# Supportive and responsive caregiving can help

## Supportive Relationships Restore Disrupted Stress Response



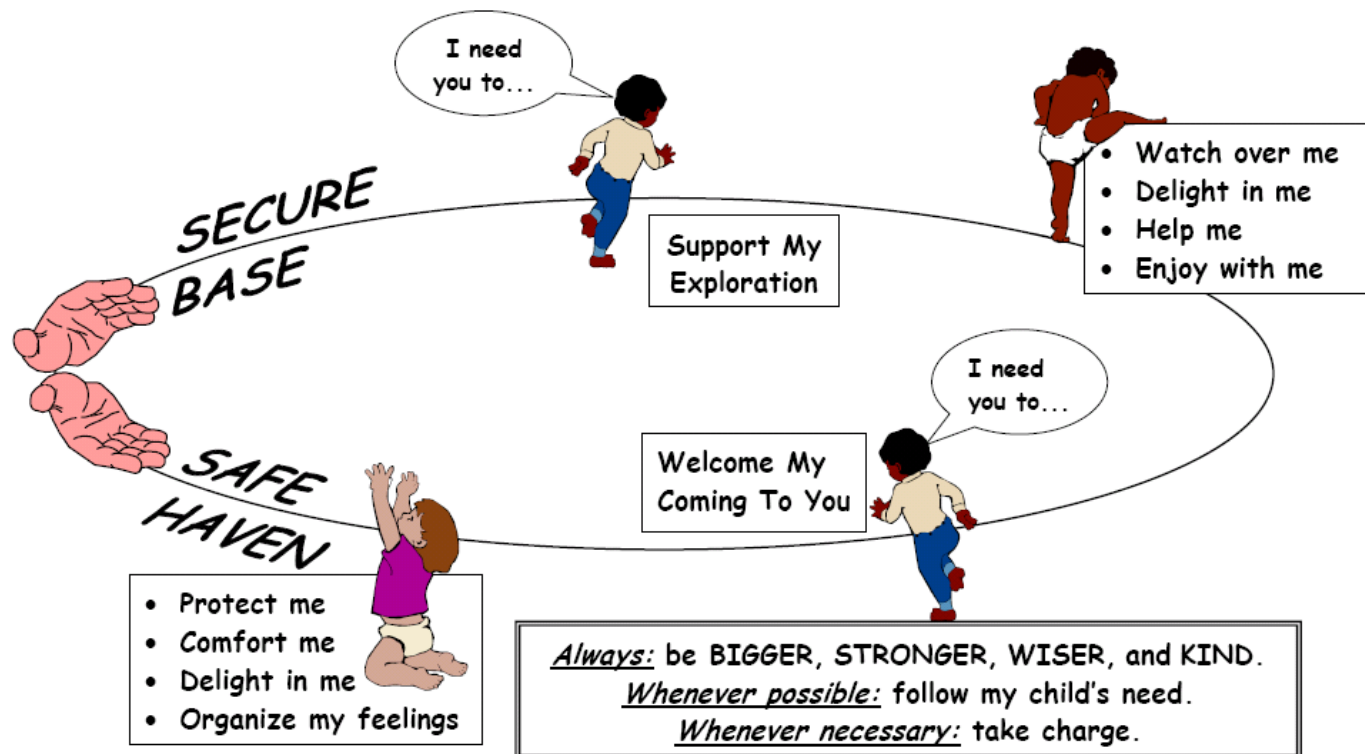
Children in the child welfare system, many suffering from serious neglect, can see dramatic improvements in stress response with the provision of supportive relationships. Without such relationships, children in this study who received standard foster care showed suppressed levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which worsened the longer they were in foster care. Foster parents trained to provide responsive relationships through the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for Preschoolers intervention (see sidebar on page 12) were able to restore foster children's stress hormones to typical levels, as measured in a control group of children from the same community who were not in foster care.

Source: Fisher, et al. (2007)<sup>26</sup>

# Simple but difficult

## CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS



# Conclusion

- Safety First
- Understand the child's experience
- Mobilise caregiving in relationship

# Thank you

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