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A brief guide to creating psychosocial healing spaces for young children

# Collective Healing Spaces

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## Table of Contents

<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
About Amna	5
<b>Collective Healing Spaces</b>	<b>7</b>
A Values-Based Approach	7
An Identity-Informed Approach	9
<b>A Trauma-Sensitive Approach</b>	<b>12</b>
What is Trauma?	13
Possible Signs of Trauma, Toxic Stress or Retraumatization	14
Regulation	15
<b>Important Principles in Setting up Collective Healing Spaces with Children and Families in Emergency Contexts</b>	<b>18</b>
The Space	22
<b>Safeguarding concerns</b>	<b>34</b>
Managing Safeguarding Issues	34
<b>Annexes</b>	<b>36</b>
Annex 1	36
Annex 2	37

## Glossary of Terms

An **asylum seeker** is someone who has legally sought refuge in a third country.

**Collective trauma** is the impact that a traumatic event has on a community, society or nation. For example, earthquakes or genocides may provoke collective trauma. It is important to remember that while communities may experience collective trauma, each person will have their own individual response.

**Collective healing** occurs in groups when individuals come together, either in person or remotely, to heal together.

**Community resilience** describes the capacity of communities to engage with, survive and heal from adverse events. See below for how 'resilience' is defined.

**Co-regulation** is a process between two people or a group of people who, through connection, manage to achieve greater emotional regulation. For example, when a caregiver talks to a distressed child with a soothing and calming voice, and both feel calmer afterwards. Or when a group participates in a regulating activity and the group energy calms in response to the exercise.

**Early childhood development (ECD)** describes the period of a child's life from 0 to 8 years of age, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Early childhood development services, including early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood care and development services (ECCD), provide opportunities for children to explore, play and learn about the world with trained caregivers.

**Emotional regulation (also referred to as self-regulation or regulation)** is the ability to manage one's emotional and physiological responses during or after stressful events. When we are emotionally regulated, we feel able to manage ourselves and trust our decision making during or after stressful events. Regulation practices may include exercises involving breathwork, music, movement or relaxation rituals to help restore equilibrium.

**An identity informed approach** acknowledges and welcomes the many different components of each person's identity. In implementing this approach, individuals accessing services choose what aspects of themselves they want to bring and share, and organisations continuously reflect and address power dynamics and inequalities in their work.

**Intergenerational trauma** describes the psychological impact of traumatic experiences on subsequent generations.

A **refugee** is someone who has been forcibly displaced from their country of origin.

**Trauma** describes the body's emotional and physiological response to a traumatic event. When bodies are unable to process or release the overwhelming emotions and stress hormones during a traumatic event, our trauma response can remain stored in our body, causing a part of us to be stuck in the past traumatic event. This

trauma response can then become reactivated when our brain perceives a similar threat. This is called **re-traumatisation**.

A **traumatic event** refers to any event or life experience that challenges an individual's sense of psychological or physical safety. Threat of death, serious injury, violence, abuse or neglect all have the potential to be traumatic.

Being **trauma-sensitive** means intentionally creating spaces and relationships that are nurturing and healing. We do not assume that someone is , but we create spaces and services that support people to self and co-regulate (see definition of regulation).

A **trauma-informed approach** reflects how services acknowledge the possible impact of trauma on individuals, families and communities. A trauma-informed approach is reflected both in the way that people interact and through organisational practices that create a sense of predictability and provide opportunities for emotional regulation and psychosocial healing.

**Vicarious trauma** refers to an empathetic response experienced when working with people who have experienced trauma. The 'helper' feels the trauma or stress that someone else is experiencing as if they have experienced such events.

**Psychosocial** is a term that describes the interactions of social, cultural, and other forces on an individual's emotional state and wellbeing.

**Psychosocial support** describes interventions that try to improve a person's wellbeing. Such interventions, according to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), are informed by the following principles. 1) A sense of safety 2) Calmness 3) Individual and the community self-determination 4) Connection 5) Hope.

**Resilience** is defined as the qualities that enable someone to adapt in the face of adversity and to keep going or recover from traumatic events, despite its ongoing impact. The resilience of communities to cope with, adapt to and recover from adverse events as a collective will contribute to how individuals cope and respond.

**Safe spaces** are physical or virtual spaces where people are welcomed and can come together to meet and connect. Such spaces are structured with regular and predictable routines and activities that help individuals feel witnessed and cared for, and over time feel part of community that they belong to.

**Toxic stress** is the body's response to prolonged stress, or multiple stressful experiences simultaneously, such as living in a war zone, the impact of a natural disaster, the threat of conflict, exposure to violence or experiencing loss, mistreatment or abuse.

**Values-based** describes the principles that inform an organisation or initiative. A values-based approach values quality over quantity and experience above numbers. Stated values such as equity or respect then inform all organisational decision-making, policies, procedures and interactions.

**Youth** are defined by the United Nations as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age, although many states will have their own definitions in law.

**Respite** refers to allowing and supporting the body, mind, and spirit to rest and recover.

## Introduction

This guide was put together by Amna's team including Early Childhood Development and Education specialists, therapists and people with lived experience of forced displacement. All Amna's programmes are co-created with the communities they serve.

This guide shares good practice principles when setting up psychosocial services in emergency settings. It is based on our learning and experiences from over six years of establishing, and helping other organisations establish, safe spaces for young children and their families in refugee camps and urban settings.

This booklet is not a manual, it is a set of good practice principles to help inform your planning and delivery. It is aimed at people who are working directly with affected communities whether as volunteers, managers or practitioners. The guide sets out basic principles to consider when establishing safe spaces for young children and their families. It is intended to be easy to use for those who are new to planning and delivering such services or for those who want a refresher in good practice.

## About Amna

Our work began in a tent on the border between Greece and North Macedonia and is now growing globally. We focus on where we can make the most difference by delivering services that mitigate the impact of trauma and toxic stress. Our play-based early childhood programme, [Baytna](#), supports healing among the whole family and our youth programme [Dinami](#) offers a safe space for young people to connect with each other. We also offer [online therapeutic support](#) to men and women, as well as [online wellbeing spaces](#) for humanitarians.

Now, we're partnering with community organisations around the world to offer trauma and identity-informed psychosocial care to people affected by conflict, natural disasters and forced displacement. We invest in and train local organisations to set up safe, collective healing spaces that provide trauma and identity-informed psychosocial care with people who have become refugees. We facilitate learning and knowledge-sharing across our partners to create refugee healing networks.

Our mission is to strengthen community capacity for healing. Our vision is a world where refugee can determine their futures, unbounded by the impacts of conflict and displacement.

Amna provides training on trauma-sensitive interventions that can support you in facilitating safe practices. Visit Amna's [website](#) for upcoming training dates.

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## Collective Healing Spaces

Amna's early childhood collective healing spaces are designed for children and families who have experienced extreme events such as conflict, violence, or natural disasters. These spaces provide a place of joy, respite, understanding and belonging, where children and caregivers can heal and build resilience together. Children and families are equipped with simple tools to support their recovery following the shock and stress of their experiences, by working collectively to rebuild trust, safety and connection where these have been impacted by adverse events.

Collective healing spaces build upon good early childhood practice in a way that is child-centred, intentional and play-based. There is an emphasis on routines and activities that promote emotional regulation, self and group expression, and help cultivate responsive relationships between children and their caregivers.

### Collective healing spaces:

- Welcome and accept participants exactly as they are and honour their feelings, pace of engagement and emotional processes;
- Enable people to meet together, share experiences and foster a sense of belonging in the presence of warm, kind and considerate facilitators;
- Can help participants to make sense of their experiences, feelings, and emotional responses. They offer hope, relaxation, laughter, and moments of joy, which we consider crucial for healing, and can help emotional-regulation and reconnecting to a sense of future.

We recommend that sessions include a variety of psychosocial practices you feel able to facilitate safely and responsibly (such as play, storytelling, movement, music, art, breathing exercises) so that each group member can find their own way to express themselves and to co-regulate effectively. Participants can then start to employ these practices outside of the collective healing space, whenever feels right for them.

Different tools and practices will work for different people and be more helpful in different moments. This is why it's important to introduce different activities and practices, rather than simply repeating the same one.

## A Values-Based Approach

A values-based approach in psychosocial work involves incorporating and integrating values, ethics, and principles into the practice of addressing psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities. It is an approach that recognises the importance of values in human behaviour, emotions, and relationships, and considers them as essential factors in promoting holistic and sustainable psychosocial health.

Amna – Refugee Healing Network 21

## What do we mean by ‘values’?

- They refer to what's important to us (and not necessarily to what is ethically correct);
- They inform the different actions we take, decisions we make, our way of living and the attributes of the person we want to be;
- Values are deeply personal and unique to each person;
- Living in harmony with our values can help us to feel a greater sense of fulfilment, authenticity and meaning;
- Examples of values: honesty, tolerance, self – reliance, strength, justice, loyalty, diversity.



*Image: Diana Ejaita*

Working in a values-based way means that an agreed upon set of values informs the way we connect with colleagues and service participants, as well as the way we set up our services and facilitate our approach.

In Amna’s values-based approach, the carefully chosen core values of respect, understanding, curiosity and connection guide Amna’s work.

**Respect:** The value of respect refers to acknowledging and honouring each individual's unique experiences, attitudes, identities, abilities, feelings, and pace engagement with the activities.

**Understanding:** The value of understanding involves actively listening with an open heart and mind, striving to empathize with others, while also recognising the humility of never fully grasping another person's perspective.

**Curiosity:** The value of curiosity entails respectfully seeking to understand each person's unique being, their ways of navigating the world, and their diverse experiences.

**Connection:** The value of connection refers to fostering positive relationships and supporting individuals in making connections between their past, present, and future selves, as well as the various identities they may experience in different contexts.

These values guide Amna’s facilitators in establishing respectful and nurturing relationships with participants, understanding the unique needs and perspectives of individuals and communities, and facilitating safety in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner.

We encourage teams to identify the values that inform their practice as these should inform how they work as teams, how they design and deliver services, as well as how they interact with people attending their services.

We have found that when you allow these values to guide your practice, they naturally support your work to be more trauma and identity-informed in its delivery.

## An Identity-Informed Approach

Amna's work is identity-informed and we also support our partners to work in this way. Identity-informed means respecting and valuing everyone's individual way of being and self-presentation – we actively celebrate and learn about our similarities and our differences. We believe that identity is fluid and can change throughout our lives. We understand that many different factors in our lives (e.g., age, place of birth, family history, beliefs of the communities that we grew up in etc.) influence our sense of identity. We work hard to not assume we understand or know what someone else's values or life experiences are, or to label people. This is crucial so that the people we work with feel free to be and to express themselves.

Rather than make assumptions about a person or a community, we always try to be respectfully curious about people's experiences and to connect with everyone as unique. We do not ask participants to represent 'their people' or community. Instead, we learn both about our own and other histories of culture, community experiences and the narratives that influence us. We reflect on how our own life experiences and the societies we have grown up in influence our perception about what is right and wrong.

We are committed to being self-reflective about the ideas or biases we hold as these might influence how we understand and interact with others and their choices and/or behaviours. We never assume that our way is the right way.

### **Identity informed facilitators:**

- Show respect to the communities they work with and consistently check themselves for the judgements they might be making;
- Remember that every person has their own story and that no one chooses to become a refugee;
- Acknowledge the huge change that comes with leaving home and everything that is familiar;
- Are honest and reflect on their personal beliefs and how this may affect professional practice;
- Recognise people's right to define their own identities and help them to express these in safe and contained spaces;
- Are curious about the identities of people with whom they work and make a personal effort to learn more, through respectful, curious conversations that help them connect with the person or family they are working with;

- Ensure that everybody is made to feel welcome and included in the community spaces/ services they facilitate. When problems arise, they work with their teams to resolve these.

### Identity Informed Tips

#### **Establish an inclusive environment early.**

- Agree on a group contract that informs that creates rules for the group.
- Suggest rules that promote respectful communication.
- Refer to the rules when they are broken in a non-judgmental way.

#### **Avoid asking participants to be experts about their community.**

- Don't assume that people from the same community share the same ideas or habits.

#### **Diversify your materials.**

- Use a range of materials from across the world in your community spaces: books, artists, writers, songs, posters, activities, scents, flavours and textures.
- Put up the creations of participants around the space. Make sure everyone is represented.

#### **Hold everyone to high expectations.**

- Do not expect less of participants because of their age, (dis)abilities, religious beliefs, language skills, ethnicities or background.
- Be prepared to calmly and constructively challenge views or attitudes that are discriminatory.

### Reflective Practice

If you are a facilitator who has experienced events similar to the communities you work with, for example, you are a refugee who is providing psychosocial support to others whilst experiencing the same issues yourself, some interactions and issues may provoke difficult memories or strong feelings that can influence the way you work if not addressed. Where possible you may benefit from reflective practice support, supervision or additional team check-ins to support you to manage your psychological wellbeing alongside that of the children and families in the collective healing space.

For facilitators from host communities, without relevant lived experience, it is important to also have support through supervision to ensure that you are able to acknowledge and reflect on your own psychological wellbeing without being affected by vicarious trauma (see definition in Glossary).

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## A Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Throughout Amna's projects we support participants to have fun, build relationships, engage in psychosocial activities that support emotional regulation, and to connect to what gives participants hope.

Your goal is to create a safe, nurturing collective healing space for families who may have faced very stressful events, who may be experiencing trauma and who need respite.

Your activities should be designed with the awareness that participants may be carrying trauma physically and emotionally in their bodies and seek to actively avoid causing any further harm or re-traumatisation. Below are some things you need to know about trauma-sensitive practice.

### Exposure to stress

Trauma is closely related to stress and can be caused by extended exposure to extreme (or toxic) stress (see definition in Glossary). Often, we may not be aware of or understand what is happening in these moments. While stress can be positive and is a completely natural and normal response, it can also be very difficult to cope with when severe and enduring. The image below shows three main kinds of stress.

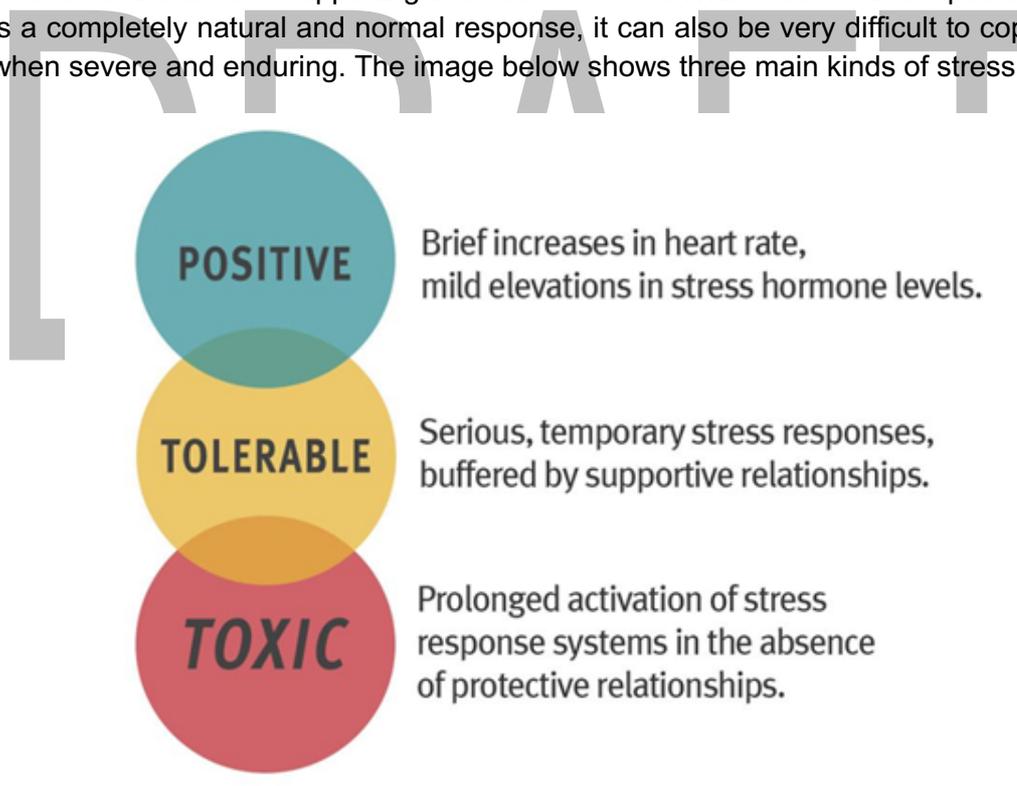


Figure 1 Toxic stress - The Harvard Center for the Developing Child

## What is Trauma?

'Trauma' in Greek means 'wound'. Trauma describes our emotional and physiological response to highly stressful experiences such as severe danger, violence, significant loss and/or life-threatening events.

A 'traumatic event' is an event or series of events that are very distressing to an individual.

An event is likely to be traumatic if:

- It happens unexpectedly;
- It happens repeatedly;
- You felt powerless to prevent it;
- There is intention behind it.

When we experience traumatic events or extreme stress our body experiences a flood of emotion and stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol that activate when we're in danger to help us to survive life-threatening situations. Usually, following such an instance, our brain assesses whether we are still in danger and sends a signal to our body that it is safe to return to its 'normal' state. However, sometimes our bodies will remain on alert for danger even when we are no longer at risk. This is known as '**hypervigilance**'.

Extreme stress or a traumatic experience can also be so overwhelming that we cannot access the tools to help our body release the emotion and stress hormones that have built up and, subsequently, we continue to carry our trauma response in our body. In these instances, a part of us becomes stuck in the traumatic event or experience, as if we are still under threat. A common sign of this is flashbacks and reoccurring nightmares that continually take people back to these moments.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that trauma affects the body in many ways and every person will experience it differently. Everybody responds to events in their own way and at different times in our lives we may respond differently to similar events. For this reason, we should never assume that a person who has experienced an extreme event is traumatised, nor should we assume that someone would respond to experiences the way we think we would.

## Possible Signs of Trauma, Toxic Stress or Retraumatiation

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### Possible Signs of Trauma / Toxic Stress

<b>Physical</b>		<b>Behavioural</b>
Fatigue / lethargy, recurring physical symptoms (e.g. headaches), frequent or chronic illnesses.		Avoidant, addiction, isolation, excessive going out / keeping busy.
<b>Emotional</b>		<b>Relational</b>
Irritability, resentment, hopelessness, insecurity, depression, anxiety, helplessness.		Argumentative, distrustful of others, reclusive, dependent on others.
	<b>Mental</b>	
	Flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, images, difficulty concentrating.	

Figure 2 Possible signs of trauma

It is vital we don't pathologise (clinically diagnose with a psychiatric label) normal responses to highly stressful situations. The possible signs of trauma, re-traumatiation and toxic stress, which are outlined above, are also normal symptoms for anyone who has experienced high levels of stress or a traumatic experience. For example, we may not feel like ourselves for many months following the loss of someone we are very close to, but we tend to recover over time. Similarly, most people who have supportive networks and the opportunity to experience respite will start to feel better with time.

This quote from Viktor Frankl is essential to remember when working with people experiencing toxic stress or trauma:



**An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behaviour.**

Victor E. Frankl



## Regulation

When we are experiencing trauma or toxic stress we need to find ways to regulate. Regulation means that we are able to help our bodies to settle and experience a sense of calm and stability.

Dan Siegel (1999) came up with the term 'window of tolerance' to describe a state when, despite difficulty and feeling stress, we feel able to manage. When we are in our window of tolerance we can trust ourselves to think clearly about the choices we make.

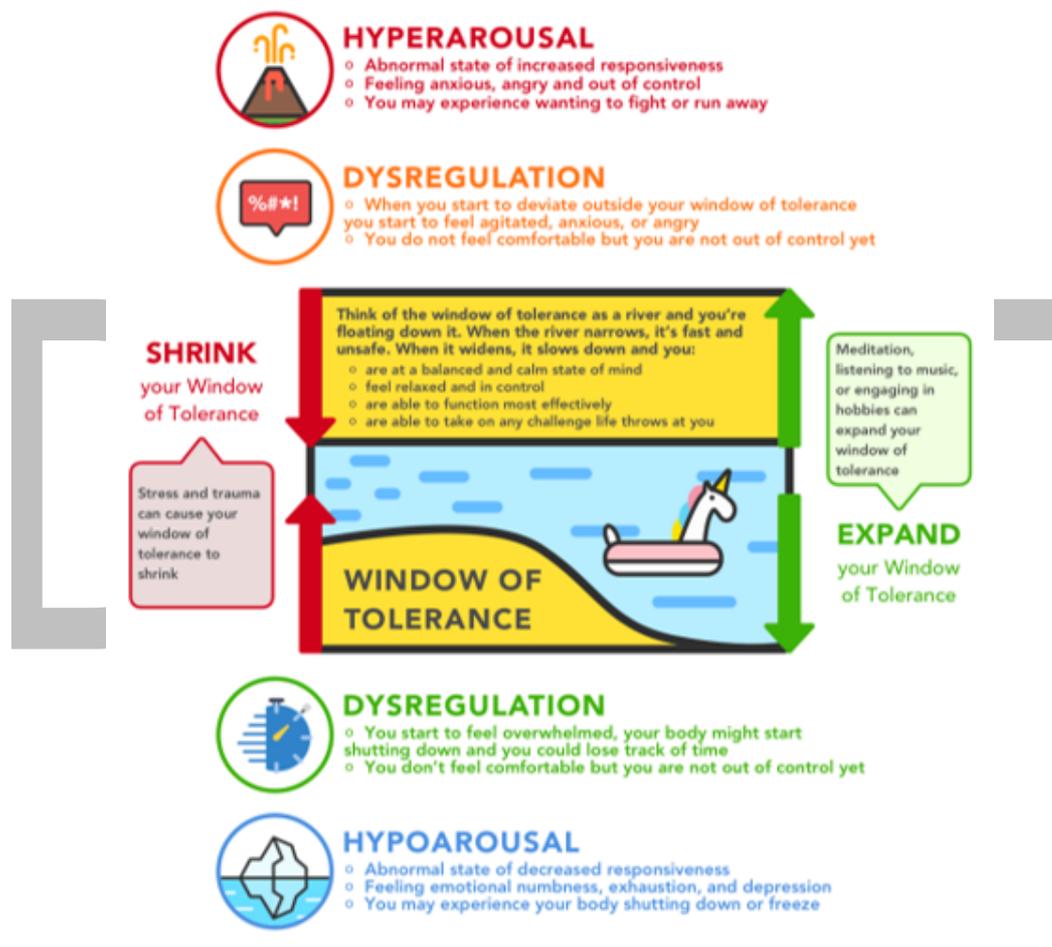


Figure 3 Dan Siegel's Window of Tolerance

When our bodies become overwhelmed from extreme stress or trauma we usually move outside of our 'window of tolerance'. When this happens, we tend to experience **hyperarousal** – this is an over-activated state where the overwhelm of emotions and stress cannot be contained within us and starts to spill out, pushing us to and beyond our edges.

When an adult is in this state, signs you might notice include: Sleeping problems, difficulties concentrating, irritability, angry outbursts, panic, chronic anxiety, being

easily scared or startled, self-destructive behaviour (such as fast-driving, drinking too much, addiction to substances, compulsive sex), a heavy sense of guilt or shame, flashbacks (vivid memories of a traumatic event); panic attacks, heart palpitations and attempts to avoid triggers that might cause thoughts about a traumatic event that impact on the ability to live a full life.

The other way we can react to overwhelming stress and emotion that we don't feel able to process or contain in our bodies is to *disconnect* or *disassociate* from our feelings and somatic experiences. This is known as **hypo-arousal**. When we are hypo-aroused we may become emotionally numb, and feel less present, alive or alert as usual.

Signs of hypo-arousal include: Exhaustion, depression, feeling flat, wanting to sleep all the time, reduced appetite or binge eating, feeling emotionally deadened, numbness (not being able to feel anything), disconnection or dissociation (drifting off into our imagination or going somewhere in our minds we can't recall and not being 'in' our body or feel present for experiences), moving or speaking very slowly, being unable to stand up, not being able to focus and feeling unable to think or communicate clearly.

## Trauma responses in children

In children, sleeping difficulties and nightmares related to the traumatic event are common. Children may also try to re-enact the traumatic event or parts of the event when they play. For example, young children may enact agitated or anxious conversations that they've witnessed in the adults around them.

Some signs you may notice in young children are:

- Regression (behaviour more typical of a younger age), such as bed wetting or anxiety about separation which parents may tell you was not the case before the emergency;
- Withdrawn behaviour, demonstrated by a reluctance to connect with caregivers or other children, or to engage in play;
- Aggression in interactions with peers, for example when being asked to take turns or share resources;
- Wanting to be physically close and comforted all the time.

## Key principles to remember

- We never assume that someone is traumatised. Everyone's experience is different and what can be traumatic for one person, might not be for another.
- Unless we are qualified experts, it is not our place to diagnose people's behaviours.
- We listen to and observe people's body language with respect and curiosity.

- We recognise that we are each our own expert. We trust that when in their window of tolerance, a person knows best what they need and what is best for them, and we do not try to impose our ideas. However, we are there to help and support when invited to.
- Have a referral network system. Be prepared for what to do if someone's needs are greater than what your service can provide.
- Respect each person's relationship to their body. Participants know their bodies better than we know their body. Never force someone to participate in an activity that they chose not to.
- Respect each participant's pace, energy, and circumstances. Adjust the activities accordingly.
- Be patient and do not seek fast results or change.

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## Important Principles in Setting up Collective Healing Spaces with Children and Families in Emergency Contexts

Collective healing spaces are designed with the aim of making families feel welcome, accepted in a place where they can express themselves, relax, learn, connect and have fun.

**Safety** is a key priority and refers to both physical and psychological safety. To keep a collective healing space safe, you (and everyone working in the space) need to:

- Ensure that your practices are trauma-sensitive and identity-informed;
- Clearly define each team member's role and responsibilities, promote awareness of the procedures of the organisation you are affiliated with, and signpost wider safeguarding and mental health referral networks throughout your team;
- Keep professional boundaries at all times;
- Clarify expectations and regulations with all those attending services;
- Sign and comply with your organisation's Code of Conduct and Child and Vulnerable Adult Safeguarding policies;
- Ensure that you have collected all necessary data from participants and are aware of any special needs;
- Ensure that people do not feel threatened inside the space, that they know whom to speak to if this occurs and that any safety issue will be taken seriously and dealt with appropriately;
- Reflect your team values in all of your work and interactions;
- Seek help if you are struggling with your emotional reactions to the people you are working with<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Amna facilitates wellbeing spaces for humanitarians, see our website or contact [info@amna.org](mailto:info@amna.org) for more information.

## Dealing with conflict

Creating a safe environment for all also means it is important to deal with any tensions or conflicts as they arise between adults or children. When individuals have experienced stressful events, it is common that they blame others as being the cause of their problems, as they are trying to make sense of a chaotic and unpredictable situation. Consequently, intercommunal or interpersonal tensions can occur which can lead to resentment and conflict. For example, there may be arguments over resources if they are scarce; or one community may be perceived as receiving better treatment than another.

Things might not always go to plan. If conflict arises or someone becomes distressed:

- Stay calm and model regulating behaviours (such as communicating clearly and calmly and using welcoming, calming body language).
- Ensure everyone is safe and that no one is in danger.
- Try to understand what the problem is once the situation is calm and safe.
- Avoid punishing or blaming children or caregivers (including sending children to sit in a corner alone). Instead, if someone is very distressed invite them to a separate space such as the crafts room or regulation corner and help them to soothe using practices you know they respond well to and the materials available. Do not instruct or impose activities but invite participation and trust that each child or caregiver will respond in the way that they need at their own pace. Observe whether it would be beneficial to do an activity together or at the same time (e.g., running on the spot or pushing against a wall to release anger) or if they would benefit from some time alone (e.g., listening to some music and playing or painting).
- Try to normalise responses to overwhelming feelings or triggers. Praise children or adults for their efforts – without patronising them.
- If a participant's behaviour hurts other children, facilitators should enforce boundaries with compassion, sensitivity and understanding, for example: "we just want to make sure we are not hurting someone else".
- Once everyone is safe and calm, where possible, support children and caregivers to re-connect and, where helpful, to find a way for anyone involved in the conflict to empathise and understand each other. Welcome everyone to share their point of view or feelings if they wish. Unless there is a safety issue, whenever possible, support children and caregivers to re-engage with the session once they are better regulated so they understand that they continue to be welcome in this community and that trauma/stress response behaviours are understood within the context of their experiences.

- If a child has reoccurring issues engaging with other children in the space, dialogue with their caregiver. Share each of your thoughts and discuss possible solutions together. Find out about their strategies with their child and explore if they already use or could try regulation techniques that you can see work in the sessions, such as calm breathing, or movement activities that release overwhelming energy, outside of the collective healing space with their child.
- After the session, reflect on the situation with your team. What do you feel you handled well? How would you like to respond differently in future? Did you work well together as a team to manage the situation? Agree on ideas for the future and make changes if needed.

Here are some activity ideas that reinforce inclusion and build trust and respectful communication:

- **“Group contract”**: During the initial stages of the sessions, collaborate with the children and their caregivers to establish a group contract that outlines the mutually agreed-upon rules for the space. When discussing the rules, aim to be less directive and more receptive to suggestions from the group. It's important to regularly revisit the rules, especially after conflicts arise, and encourage the group to reflect on whether a rule is still effective or requires adjustments, or if a new rule is necessary. To promote a sense of group ownership, consider inviting the group to sign the ‘contract’.
- **“Rituals of respect”**: Consider incorporating a slogan that emphasises respect as part of your rituals. For instance, you could use a phrase like "I respect myself, I respect others, I respect the space." You can complement the slogan with corresponding body movements, such as placing a hand on your heart for "I respect myself," holding hands with others for "I respect others," and touching the floor for " I respect the space." Additionally, you could add a melody to transform the slogan into a song. This can become a daily practice to remind everyone of the fundamental rules of the space. It can serve as a point of reference during conflicts, helping to re-establish the shared identity of the space.
- **“I - statements”**: When sharing as a group, invite participants to start the sentence using “I” For example: “I am feeling sad because...”; ‘I heard XX saying...’. By using an ‘I statement’ we own what we are feeling, or the opinion we are sharing. This way our statements cannot be criticisms of another and therefore can help us to have less attacking and more connected dialogue. It can be hard at first but gets easier with practice! You can facilitate games that allow participants to practice speaking about their experiences and feelings, using “I” statements.

- **"Feelings Faces"**: This activity can help to promote emotional awareness and communication skills. For example, you can help children express and identify their emotions through a game of facial expressions. Invite them to take turns acting out different emotions through facial expressions and invite others to guess the emotion. Let the group take turns guessing the emotion. The process of naming the emotion helps children to develop an emotional vocabulary. Afterwards invite the person expressing the emotion to share how they felt the emotion in their body. Did it feel big or small? Where in their body did they feel the emotion?
- **"Conflict Resolution Wheel"**: This activity promotes decision-making, conflict resolution and self-regulation skills. Create a wheel with different strategies for conflict resolution. The wheel could include: talking it out, taking deep breaths, walking away, or seeking help from an adult. Have children and adults spin the wheel and discuss how they can apply the strategy in different conflict situations. In moments of conflict, get out the wheel and help individuals choose what they need in that moment.
- **"Storybooks"**: These activities use storytelling as a tool to explore emotions. Engage in storybook reading sessions that help participants to connect to and process the different emotions inspired by these stories. For example, the storybook "Ruby's Worry" by Tom Percival takes the reader on a journey about how to cope with and communicate about feeling worried. "The Rabbit Listened" by Cori Doerrfeld explores the power of listening and helps the reader to understand and develop this skill. Finally, "The Colour Monster" by Anna Llenas explores various emotions.
- **"Community Garden"**: This activity promotes cooperation and connection through shared caretaking activities. Organise and establish a community garden that serves as a space where children and families can gather to grow and tend to plants together. Purposefully create opportunities for individuals who may have conflicts with each other to work on planting projects together, fostering bonding through shared responsibility. During the gardening activities, discuss the different components of a plant, such as roots, branches, and petals, while drawing parallels to our own needs for care and nurture.

Effectively managing conflict demands patience and ongoing commitment. It is crucial to remember that your role is to facilitate constructive and connected communication between individuals and the group, rather than solving problems on their behalf. Working with children and adults in this context is a dynamic and non-linear process that may sometimes be uncomfortable or challenging. A conflict on a particular day may not be able to be resolved that day and may require you as the facilitator to hold belief in the longer term potential for reconciliation and connection

between the individuals. This patience and understanding will help your group members. In all instances your responsibility is to model the values of respect, understanding, curiosity and connection throughout the process, and provide positive feedback on the efforts made by everyone involved towards connection and reconciliation.

Maintaining a **predictable** space with established routines can contribute towards a sense of safety. This is important for everyone but particularly for displaced people who are on the move and who may have little stability in their lives.

Try to avoid unpredictable situations wherever possible, such as last-minute timetable changes, or frequent turnovers of staff and volunteers. Maintain and apply consistent guidelines for the timing of sessions, how parents and caregivers are involved, food and snacks, how and where materials are stored and so on.

Last but not least, you need to be **accountable** for the service you provide. It means that you and your team take responsibility for decisions taken, reflect on, learn from and acknowledge where relevant any mistakes made, and seek guidance where appropriate.

This can include providing opportunities for community members to provide feedback on the space.

## The Space

Collective healing spaces can be set up in small

### Useful Definitions

**Free play** describes when children play, investigate, explore, experiment and exercise autonomy without adult intervention. During free play, children are often spontaneous and play with whatever they want, however they want, as long as their play does not harm anyone. Children create their own games, interact, imagine, negotiate, problem solve, calculate, and use materials as their imaginations and interactions guide them. Children might invite adults to join them which can be very positive if the adults follow the children's lead and do not direct play. Adults often have an important role in free play by actively listening, paying attention and being present during free play so children feel seen and heard.

**Circle Time** describes the point during a session when the whole group comes together in a circle. This can be a good opportunity to practice creative rituals, such as greeting songs, calendar tracking (what's the day, date, time), attendance (who is here, who is home), check-ins about emotional wellbeing (how we feel today), weather tracking (what's the weather like), word of the day etc. Additionally, during circle time, children and caregivers are invited to talk about any topic that they wish to talk about. The facilitator models and encourages active listening, turn-taking and peaceful communication. Read more about circle time on page 25.

**Rituals** are activities that happen every day in the same way. They serve the purpose of reinforcing a sense of safety and help to transition from one session to another. They contribute towards building stable and predictable patterns that help the participants feel safe and in control in the community environment. You can use ritual activities to welcome or say goodbye to the participants, to tidy up the space, to move from one activity to another or to do check-ins.

physical locations with minimal resources. Ideally, the space you use should be inside, somewhere calm, and not accessible to anyone not attending the session. This is important to establish a sense of purpose, safety and ensure privacy wherever possible. For example, we recommend closing any doors after all participants have arrived.

When distractions cannot be limited, the space needs to be set up in the easiest and most effective way for you to monitor and run the session. You can also publicise that the space is used at particular times, such as through a poster or social media post, and ask others to respect participants' privacy and to keep noise to a minimum.

**Circle time** activities promote connection and a sense of belonging and are therefore an important component of every session. For circle time you will need sufficient space for everyone to sit down in a circle. This needs to be safe, clean and easy to access for everyone so make sure you are aware of and can accommodate any particular needs.

### Dividing the space into corners

Start setting up a space by dividing it into sections. These will be your 'corners;' or 'areas' to be used for different parts of the session. Use rugs, pillows or any other materials that can be placed on the floor to demarcate a corner or area. If your space is shared, you might place something on the ground to create some physical boundaries or you may have materials or activities in bags or containers that you distribute to different parts of the room/space to differentiate thematic areas. It's possible that you will need to make adjustments throughout the session to accommodate the different activities.

Next, decide how you will use each corner, depending on the materials you have and the ages, needs and preferences of the children. You might for example have a construction corner/area, where you provide building blocks and wooden sticks; a creative corner with playdough, paper, markers, chalk and boards; an exploration corner with natural materials and different utensils such as cups, spoons, magnifying lenses; and a relaxation corner filled with sensory materials.

The corners will be used throughout the sessions. For example, during free-play all children can play as they wish, without being invited to follow structured activities. At other times, children may choose or be divided into smaller groups to rotate to each of the areas in turn. Interactive play between corners is also likely, as a child might build a house with wooden blocks in the creative corner and then maybe bring in toys from another corner, such as a soft toy or hoop to add to the story being enacted.

Every collective healing space needs to include a calming relaxation corner, where you can put some pillows or soft toys to support regulation and relaxation if needed. Some useful soothing materials to put here are objects with different textures, scents, sounds and colours. Materials that invite expression (like books, markers and papers), awakening and movement are also useful to keep here.

If you have limited space, keep materials in different boxes/bags/containers for the children to choose and play with during free play. Store all materials for your

scheduled activities (as well as some calming materials) separately, so they do not get lost during free play.

See Amna's activities booklet for more ideas.

### Ensuring safety

Last but not least, ensure that your physical space contains no major hazards for the safety of the children and their families. This includes sharp corners, objects or materials, tiny toys that can be swallowed, dangerous liquids, dangerous electrical sockets or cables, or materials that someone may be allergic to.

If you are in an area at risk of natural disaster, it's important to ensure that there are protocols in place for evacuation that both children and adults are familiar with in the setting.

Carefully consider the images being displayed in your space or in the books that families can access so they reflect a wide range of families and backgrounds. Avoid images that risk triggering traumatic memories. For example, this may include stories about the sea if you are working with communities who have endured dangerous journeys to safety via boat.

Once the space is set up, be open to changes that will arise naturally from the session, the children, or the families. This is a shared space that will keep developing as you go. The more families and the community feel ownership over the space and shape it to make it how they want it to feel, the better.

### Planning sessions

We recommend running sessions at least twice per week and for 90 minutes. Of course, this will depend on the setting and context but remember to aim for predictability and consistency. The more frequently someone can attend, the more opportunities for healing and recovering a sense of internal safety there are.

Sessions can follow or adapt this structure:

- Everyone is welcomed and settled;
- Introduce children into the space gradually with free-play;
- Once the majority of children have arrived bring the group together with circle time;
- Follow with 1-2 structured arts, crafts, movement, storytelling activities or rotate into each of the thematic corners/areas;
- Finish with relaxation and grounding activities and encourage children to help tidy the space;
- Ensure all children and families are acknowledged as they leave the space.

Ritual activities should also be part of each session, at the start, end and between sections of a session. You can use ritual activities to welcome or say goodbye to the participants, to tidy up the space, to move from one activity to another or to check-in.

### Planning

It is helpful to establish aims and activities for each session with the facilitation team. The templates in Annex 2 can be used for this purpose.

The aims will be informed by your interaction with participants and observations from the session. For example, an aim may be to help build concentration. Activities to support concentration may include providing jigsaw puzzles or using songs or rhymes where children listen and follow instructions.

As you plan your collective healing space, keep in mind the skills below. These will help you shape your activities to support the developmental processes of the children in your sessions.

Skills for THINKING	Description
Creativity	Uses their imagination to make meaning and express themselves.
Flexibility	Supports adapting to and coping with change.
Focus	Supports concentration.
Problem Solving	Develops and implements strategies to overcome challenges.
Memory	Helps to build knowledge through information recall.

Work with their EMOTIONS	Description
Being Present	Can connect to the emotions they are feeling.
Recognising feelings	Can acknowledge and name the emotions they experience.
Managing feelings	Able to regulate their emotions.
Expressing feelings	Able to communicate about and explain their emotions.
Safety	Feel safe and secure in their emotions.

RELATE to others	Description
Empathy	Can identify the emotions of others and how they impact them.
Trust	Can feel physically and emotionally safe with others.

Communication	Able to exchange information and ideas with others.
Collaboration	Able to work with others to achieve a goal.
Compromise	Able to make concessions to settle disagreements and disputes.

HONOUR their experiences	Description
Feel secure	Feel safe and unthreatened.
Feel accepted	Feel approved of as they are.
Feel grounded	Feel physically and emotionally stable.
Feel resilient	Able to recover from adversity.
Be in control	Feel a sense of power and agency within themselves.

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### Activity examples

Here are some examples of activities you can use. Remember to adapt according to the age of participants, your setting and available materials. See Amna's Activities booklet for more activities with fuller descriptions and that are age-appropriate.

Activity Name	Goals	Materials	Description	Notes
1. <i>The spider web</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Getting to know each other</li> <li>Connection</li> </ul>	Long Woollen Knitting Yarn	<p>Invite the group to sit in a circle.</p> <p>Suggest playing with the woollen yarn and pass it around once for everyone to touch it, squeeze it, smell it etc.</p> <p>Keep one end of the yarn in your hand and pass the woollen yarn ball to someone opposite you. Whoever takes the ball can say their name, or make a gesture, take a breath in their own way and the group follows, etc. After this, he/she/they holds onto the of the yarn and throws the ball to someone else.</p> <p>By the end you will have created a spiderweb inside your circle. If appropriate, you can invite participants to take turns walking or crawling through the web while you move it up and down.</p>	
2. <i>Invisible drawing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spark imagination</li> </ul>	None	Imagine you can turn into human-sized colour markers and use your body to paint anything you see around you: the	You may want to play music to accompany this activity. Be thoughtful about which music.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full body movement</li> <li>• Energise</li> </ul>		<p>air, the walls, the objects.</p> <p>With one full turn of your body you can transform into any other colour you wish.</p> <p>Invite the families to engage in this imaginative game and play by colouring the surrounding environment with their body.</p> <p>You can also accompany the activity with music in different tempos.</p>	<p>We recommend you use instrumental music and songs that do not risk triggering your group through lyrics or associated memories.</p> <p>Remember to be cognisant of any religious holidays or practices by group members that prohibit listening to music.</p>
<p>3. "Guess what" Sensory Game</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Problem Solving</li> <li>• Exploration with senses</li> </ul>	<p>Carton box Cotton Toys from different materials</p>	<p>Fill a box with cotton. Place inside different materials from the space such as a car, a feather, a rock, a sponge, a soft toy etc.</p> <p>Each person is invited to take turns and place their hands inside the box to find one object. Participants are invited to guess what object they are holding in their hands, without having seen it before.</p> <p>The group can help the process by asking questions. Is it big or small? Is it soft or hard? Etc.</p>	
<p>4. Glitter Jar</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus</li> </ul>	<p>Jar / Plastic bottle</p>	<p>Create a glitter jar in your session, then invite caregivers to form pairs with their</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation</li> <li>• Relaxation</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>	<p>Glue Glitter Water</p>	<p>children and take a relaxing position while they are looking at the glitter jar. Invite them to turn the jar upside down or however they wish and focus on the movement of the glitter inside the bottle, as well as on the colours and shapes they can observe.</p> <p>Turning the lights down and lighting up the glitter jar with a torch or light from your phone can make this even more exciting for some participants.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>5.Create a garden</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagination</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Expression</li> <li>• Sensory</li> </ul>	<p>Playdough Sticks Paper, Markers, Glue Scissors</p>	<p>Invite families to work together in small groups to imagine and create their own garden. Provide plenty of materials for their use.</p> <p>If the children are very young, you can make a simple map with pots or soil where they can place their creations. You can also show them an example to help explain the activity.</p>	<p>This activity can be done with many different concepts such as other planets, jungles, ocean etc.</p>

## 'Structured Unstructured' expressive activities

It is good practice to facilitate activities that invite children and caregivers to create freely, by which we mean: what they want, without a direct instruction from the facilitator e.g., to draw their favourite animal. If possible, try to avoid templates with ready drawn images for children to colour in as freehand drawing is more likely to promote imagination. Free drawing or free dancing invites children and caregivers to express and engage as they need. Usually, the body knows what it needs and these 'structured unstructured' or 'free' activities help emotions and the body to regulate. A combination of structured and less-structured activities makes up a balanced session.

These activities are intended to inspire you and give you an idea of what you might do in sessions. They can be adapted to the needs, abilities and interests of a particular group. Participants will have different strengths and abilities so remember to be flexible to keep everyone included and engaged.

Below are some examples of how to adapt activities for different ages.

### Mark-making and Painting

- Children under the age of 18 months can use paint on a tray for mark making with fingers/different parts of the body.
- Children 18 months to 3 years enjoy paper pinned on the wall at children's heights with paint or markers available to make big marks.
- Children 3 years to 6 years will use notebooks and lists in pretend play area next to a phone or for shopping lists.

### Pretend play

- Children under the age of 18 months will start to pretend to do the things they see adults do such as talk on the phone (using bricks or blocks) or eating often by bringing dolls or soft toys to feed.
- Children 18 months to 3 years will enjoy using props such as hats/shoes/scarves to dress up and pretend to be people they see around them.
- Children 3 years to 6 years will use all available props such as boxes, furniture or sheets to enact complex stories.

Remember, simple materials can be very inspiring and flexible. When facilitating groups with very young children, consider that they are in the process of developing their fine motor skills. Avoid guiding the children's hands when they are engaging in a creative activity to give them the chance to practice their own movement skills. Instead, if needed you can model (show) how to use the material or technique.

**Circle time**

- Include activities that promote expression and active listening to and for each member of the circle;
- You can include a greeting song, a feelings board activity where each person is invited to express how they feel today, a weather spy activity to help connect with the wider environment, etc.
- You can also tell a story to connect with the rest of the session's activities.
  - For example, you may tell a story about a frog who wanted to become an artist but didn't know the colours. Children are easily engaged in activities that connect to a story!

Please visit Amna's [resource page](#) for more ideas.

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## Implementation preparation

To run a successful early childhood collective healing space we recommend:

- Planning sessions ahead as much as possible. You can find a draft planning template in Annex 2 to help you plan your sessions.
- Holding session briefs/debriefs (pre and post preparation and reflection meetings) and regular team meetings in which to reflect, learn and improve the service you are providing.
- Actively listening to the needs and preferences of children and their families, reflecting on these in your team and incorporating their ideas into your service and session planning.
- Consulting with the community about their wants and needs and inviting and encouraging community members/space attendees to participate in and lead activities if they feel comfortable. Community members may have relevant skills, experiences or a commitment to supporting the development of the space/service. Even if they don't, they may have the enthusiasm and desire to support the development and delivery of the service which should be encouraged unless there is a safety issue.
- Being flexible to change activities to make sure everyone can and feels welcome to participate (if they want to); this is the priority over strictly following your session plan.
- Remembering that everyone engages and heals at a different pace and in their own way. Facilitators need to be patient and sensitive to the individuality of their participants.

### When to seek extra help

If you are finding that a child or caregiver is very distressed or unwell, do not seem to be improving after attending your service frequently and you are concerned about their wellbeing, discuss the case with your supervisor or manager, and agree if a referral to a specialist service would be appropriate.

When referring someone to a service it is important you explain clearly and transparently to the caregiver or family why you are making this recommendation/referral, explore their thoughts and feelings about this so you collaborate as much as possible to agree on the next steps and support the transition into the other service.

Ensure that you are clear about your role and responsibilities and what your organisation can and cannot provide as transparently as possible. This helps to create and maintain trusting relationships with participants. You can help this by:

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- Clarifying when someone starts attending your service what the space is for, what they can expect from you and your expectations of participants;
  - Collaborate with families to agree on appropriate rules for the space also known as a 'group contract' developed with the community (this can be an ongoing process);
  - Be mindful of your organisation's Code of Conduct. Modeling relationships with respect to the boundaries of everyone is essential to a trauma-sensitive and identity-informed approach.

Do not forget to take care of yourself and your team. Self-care is a priority not a luxury in this work. Checking in with and respecting the emotional state of your team will help you to collaborate to ensure a safe space.

It's important to regularly practice emotional regulation techniques yourself. You need to know what tools and practices help you to feel calm, grounded (stable) and present (awakened) so that you are able to hold a safe space for others. If you are not emotionally regulated yourself, you will not be able to genuinely support someone else to emotionally regulate.

Remember, being emotionally regulated does not mean that everything is ok, but it means you are in a state where you can safely take notice of, hold space for and respond to the emotional needs of the communities you work with. Sometimes it takes as little as three deep belly breaths to help us to feel emotionally regulated.

## Safeguarding concerns

It is important that you know the safeguarding policy of your organisation. Every organisation working with children and young people should have a safeguarding policy.

A safeguarding or child protection policy is a statement about how your organisation ensures the safety of children.

It should set out:

- Your organisation's commitment to protecting all children, young people and vulnerable adults;
- Detailed policies and procedures your organisation will put in place to keep children and vulnerable adults safe and respond to child protection concerns. For example, your safeguarding procedures should cover issues like how staff and volunteers should respond to concerns about the safety of a child and how you will make sure you recruit the right people to work with children and young people.
- It is vital to have safeguarding policies and procedures in place including in emergency settings where resources are scarce.

## Managing Safeguarding Issues

The intention is for you to become adults with whom participants feel safe. You may find that as a result, they share personal information with you which may raise a safeguarding concern, or you may witness injuries or behaviours that make you feel concerned about their safety.

Your organisation's safeguarding policy should tell you what to do in these instances. E.g., 1) how to safely and appropriately have a conversation with the person in question about the harm they have disclosed or you have witnessed or 2) who in your organisation is responsible for managing these concerns and should be contacted.

### **Summary:**

As you set up your early childhood collective healing space:

- Find ways to make participants feel welcome and safe.
- Ensure that you are guided by the communities you serve – find out what their needs and preferences are.
- Plan your sessions with the goals in mind.
- Adapt activities to suit the age, needs and interests of your group – try to be as flexible as possible.

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- Learn from when things go well and when they don't! Work as a team to resolve problems and seek support when needed.
  - Be guided by and discuss as a team your organisational values and ensure that each person is respected and valued.

Good luck and enjoy setting up your Collective Healing Space!



**Safety is not the absence of threat, it  
is the presence of connection.**

Gabor Mate



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# Annexes

## Annex 1

### Recommended reading

Allen, J., Fonagy, P., & Bateman, A. (2008). *Mentalising in Clinical Practice*. . Washington: American Psychiatric Press.

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Levine, P. (2012). *Somatic experiencing*.

Lin Lee, P. (2012) *Making Now Precious: Working with Survivors of Torture and Asylum Seekers*. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, Dulwich centre

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Menakem, R. (2021). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Penguin UK.

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Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *The international Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community work*, 1, 3-16.

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Rothschild, B. (2000). *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. New York : Norton Professional Books.

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Van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Books.

## Annex 2

### Session planner templates

BACKGROUND		OBJECTIVES
Date:		<p><b>Values:</b> Respect Understanding Curiosity Connecting</p> <p><b>Session Objectives</b></p> <p><u>Long term Objectives:</u></p> <p><u>Short term Objectives:</u></p> <p><b>Team Objectives</b></p> <p><u>Individual goals:</u> (What do I want to sustain, what do I want to improve?)</p> <p><u>Facilitation team goals:</u> (What do I want from my team/ What does my team want from me?)</p>
Centre:		
Any notes on participants e.g. special needs, regular attendees needs:		
<b>DRAFT</b>		
RITUALS USED		
Opening ritual:		
Circle time ritual:		
Closing ritual:		
<b>ACTIVITIES (to be performed in any order)</b>		

<b>Day:</b>	<b>Type</b> <b>Activity</b>	<b>Type:</b> <b>Activity:</b>
	<b>Objectives of the day / week</b>	Our goals are...
	<b>Core description of the activity</b>	<b>Core description:</b>  1.  2.  3.

<b>EVALUATION</b>		
<b>Day:</b>	<b>Type</b> <b>Activity</b>	<b>Type:</b> <b>Activity:</b>
	<b>Objectives of the day</b>	Our goals are:
	<b>Evaluation criteria</b> (How will I know that the goals were reached?)	<b>Observation questions</b>  1.  2.  3.