

How to Talk to Children about Flight, Fight and Freeze

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This document is a companion to our workshop and webinar Making Sense of Trauma: Practical Tools for Responding to Children and Youth www.makingsenseoftrauma.ca.

Being Trauma-Informed in Our Work

Our goal is to help children to become trauma-informed. Being trauma-informed is the shift from thinking “what is wrong with you” to “what has happened to you”. We begin by focussing on the trauma-informed principle of creating safety with the children and youth with whom we work. We co-create safety with the child through the relationship that we develop with them. The principles of being trauma-informed also include helping children to have a choice, and to feel like they have a voice. We want them to know that we are trustworthy. We do this by being transparent about what we are doing and why. Finally also we want to be aware of cultural, historical, and gender issues that may impact ourselves and the child or youth.

Why Focus on Freeze, Flight, and Fight?

We focus on the survival responses of freeze, flight, and fight, because we have learned that when children and youth do not understand their behaviour or responses they often think there is something wrong with them, or they have done something wrong. Being trauma-informed helps us to have a framework for understanding and explaining to children how survival responses in their bodies work. This is the shift from ‘what is wrong with you’ to ‘what happened to you’.

The survival responses of freeze, flight and fight, are initiated by the amygdala, located in the limbic region (the downstairs brain, Siegel & Bryson, 2011). These adaptive responses to any real or perceived threat developed over millions of years of evolution. We continue to use them because they work. Without understanding this, children and adults have trouble making sense of their behaviour (Levine, 2007). For example, they do not recognize or understand that going into freeze and not fighting back or running away was their body’s response to the threat and helped them survive.

We all have a freeze, flight and fight response. Think about what happened the last time you surprised someone. How did they respond? Some people react by backing up or turning away, which we recognize as flight. Others move forward and might even get or look angry, a fight response. Others may just stand there speechless and shocked. We call this freeze. These are not voluntary responses; this is the amygdala at work. And although most people have one survival response they use most often, we all have freeze, flight and fight responses.

We want to help increase the window of tolerance (Siegel, 2010) so that children and youth spend less time in survival responses and more time being able to learn, play, and connect. When children and youth are able to notice and recognize these survival responses, we can then help them to take steps to regulate and move back into the window of tolerance.

Our Goal – Helping Children Become Trauma-Informed

It is our experience that when children better understand what is going on in their body, after they have experienced a real or perceived threat, they can become more interested in learning how to manage their responses and can begin to heal. Children, and many adults, do not typically understand or recognize the freeze, flight and fight survival responses without our help. Often they are confused and don't understand what is going on or blame themselves as a way to explain why their body responded the way it did and why they feel the way they do. By talking to children and youth about our survival responses we can help them better understand what happened to them and how to respond and manage the response in a healthy way. This helps them make the shift from 'what is wrong with me' to 'what happened to me'.

How Do We Do This - Guidelines

We keep the initial conversation about freeze, flight and fight neutral in order to create safety with the child or youth. This is educational information that most children and youth do not have. We know that they learn best when they are settled. If at any point the child or youth becomes unsettled or dysregulated then stop and help them settle their body. You can help them begin to settle by asking them to take a breath in and a long slow breath out (repeating as often as needed), doing another activity, or changing the focus in some other way. Remind the child or youth that they can take all the time that they need to learn about these survival responses.

The intention of talking with children and youth about freeze, flight and fight is **not** to have them remember or relive their past experience. It **is** to have them understand the survival responses they experience in their bodies. By understanding they can begin to use their imaginations and be able to choose, if they want and when they are ready, to talk about the experiences that evoked the freeze, flight or fight response. Learning about freeze, flight and fight helps them to begin to create a clearer story about what happened to them, one that has a beginning, middle, and an end.

Do:

- Create a sense of safety – engage everyone's curiosity
- Make the experience playful and fun
- Do teach children and youth strategies to help them settle their bodies
- Stop when needed and help them settle
- Have caregivers &/or parents participate fully

Don't

- Make children or youth talk about their past experiences
- Scare children to demonstrate what survival responses are like

Props - Puppets, Toys or Pictures

We use props to help children focus outside of themselves. It often feels safer to focus on the puppet, toys, or picture rather than their experience. We use puppets, stuffed animals or small figurines. See appendix for photos of a rabbit, tiger, and mouse that you can use.

Start by Discussing How Children and Youth Settle

Have a conversation with the child or youth and their caregivers about what they do already to settle themselves. Do they listen to music, read, and take deep breaths? Or something more active such as dance, run, fidget, play an instrument, sing? Do they notice that if they are active they settle more or less quickly? Do they notice if they are still that they settle more or less quickly?

What does the caregiver do that helps the child or youth settle? How does this happen? Does the child or youth ask for help or can the caregiver see signs that they need help. As children and youth grow and change so do the strategies that they use or need to help them settle. This is an important conversation to have regularly.

Make a plan with the child or youth and their caregiver so that you know some things that you can do to help them settle if they notice their body getting overwhelmed by big feelings.

Talking about the Brain

We always begin by talking to children and youth about how their brains work in a very simple way.

“Did you know that we have a part of our brain called the amygdala, it is like an alarm in your brain, it is always checking to see if you are safe? If you get worried, stressed or scared then it turns on the alarm and it gets hard to think clearly. Our bodies can respond by going into freeze, flight or fight.

The amygdala is a part of your brain that turns on the alarm to go into freeze, flight and fight. To understand how this works you need to know that our bodies respond just like a car does when you press the gas pedal or the brakes. When our amygdala sounds the alarm, it sends out signals that tell our bodies to “put on the gas”. When this happens we go into flight or fight. If you can’t get away, (can’t run, can’t fight) the brakes come on really strong, while the gas is still on. This is how we go into freeze, the gas and the brakes are on at the same time.”

Remember

Children and youth can often only take in a bit at a time. They will find ways to tell you they have had enough. They may switch the subject or want to play. It is okay to take a break and tell them that you will ask about this again after the break or if needed at another time.

The more playful the conversation, the easier it is for the child or youth to take in the information.

The scripts are intended to help you as you begin to talk to children and youth about freeze, flight and fight. As you become more comfortable you will create your own script adapting to the specific needs and abilities of the child or youth with whom you are working.

Then Introduce Freeze, Flight and Fight Ideas

Script 1

“Have you ever jumped out and said ‘boo’ to someone?

Have you noticed that sometimes people look like a statue they are so surprised? We call that freeze.

Have you noticed that sometimes people start backing up and moving away like they are trying to run away? We call that flight.

Have you noticed that sometimes people get really mad that you said ‘boo’ and raise their voice and even make you want to back up? We call that fight.

So when our bodies go into freeze or flight or fight they are responding just the way that they supposed to when our feelings get big.”

Script 2

“Did you know that sometimes we are not any different than animals out in the wild? Our bodies respond when we are scared or surprised just like an animal.

What do you think a mouse does when it is scared or surprised? (Prompt: Does it freeze and hope that no one can see it, does it stop thinking, feeling or even moving?)

What does a rabbit do when it is scared or surprised? (Prompt: Does it run and run and run to get to a safe place?)

What do you think a tiger does when it is scared or surprised? (Prompt: Does it roar and growl? What else would it do?)”

Introduce Body Sensations for Freeze, Flight and Fight

Scripts for talking about freeze, flight and fight:

Freeze

Some kids tell me that when they are in freeze they notice they are:

- Spacey, **“not here”**
- Disconnected from themselves
- Frozen, numb, feel like they can’t move
- Stuck in some part of their body
- **Saying “I don’t know”** (and they don’t)
- Have no voice”

“Have you ever noticed someone responding like this?” [We might give them homework, after we have talked about all three responses to notice if kids do this at school in class or on the playground. And we might even suggest they could notice if they ever feel this way too.]

Flight

Some kids tell me that when they are in flight they notice they are:

- Restless and fidgety
- Not sitting still and have jumpy legs
- Noticing they have big eyes that are darting around
- Feeling trapped, ***“and I gotta’ get out of here feeling”***
- Feel like they want to get away, or run away
- Breathing rapidly
- Aware of their pounding heart

“Have you ever noticed someone responding like this?” [We might give them homework, after we have talked about all three responses to notice if kids do this at school in class or on the playground. And we might even suggest they could notice if they ever feel this way too.]

Fight

Some kids tell me that when they are in fight they notice they are:

- Glaring
- Raise their voice, even say ***“I hate you”***
- Argumentative and tell people ***“You don’t understand”***
- Moving towards people in a threatening way
- Wanting to stomp and kick
- Tightening their muscles, and clenching their hands

“Have you ever noticed someone responding like this?” [We might give them homework, after we have talked about all three responses to notice if kids do this at school in class or on the playground. And we might even suggest they could notice if they ever feel this way too.]

Getting More Playful – In a Small Space

When working with children and youth we often use playful ways to help them learn these ideas. If you are working in a smaller space you might be using puppets, toys or pictures to talk about freeze, flight and fight with kids and their caregivers. See the **Appendix A for full size pictures**. Please note that it is important that everyone participates, including yourself, and that we focus on using imagination rather than talking about a real experience.

Do this in small steps so that it is manageable for the child or youth and the caregiver. You might only do one of these at a time, or for some children or youth they may be able to do all three. Please make sure the child or youth is settled before you end (regular breath in and long slow breath out, shaking your body, connecting to the present etc.).

Script

Begin with bringing out the puppet, toys or pictures that represent flight, fight or freeze.

“What would you like to talk about first, freeze, flight or fight?” Let’s say the child chooses flight.

[Prompt: Or if they don’t know what to choose you could suggest you begin with flight.]

Flight



Script

“Okay, imagine that you are a rabbit and that you are being chased. Let’s imagine how the rabbit’s legs would run. Think about your breathing if you were the rabbit. Is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All those changes are normal. Have you ever noticed them before?”

“How do think the rabbit would feel? What would it be thinking?”

“When the rabbit is safe what would you begin to notice?”

“What do you notice as the rabbit begins to settle? Does its breathing change? Does its heart start to beat slower? What does it notice in its muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot, sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As the rabbit’s body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I’ll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The rabbit might want to shake their body to release all that energy. Let’s try doing that together.”

“What was that like to imagine being the rabbit? So, we are no different than the rabbit when we are stressed or scared. Sometimes we want to run too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our

own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends, or when you are watching a show, if anyone goes into flight just like a rabbit?”

Fight



Script

“Okay, imagine that you are a tiger and that you are fighting with another tiger. Let’s imagine how the tiger’s legs would run. What would it do with its claws? Would it roar? How about we try roaring?”

Notice your breathing. Is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All these changes are normal. Have you ever noticed them before?”

“How do think the tiger would feel? What would it be thinking?”

“What happens when the tiger decides to stop fighting? What would it notice in its body?”

“What does the tiger notice as its body begins to settle? Does its breathing change? Does its heart start to beat slower? What do you notice in its muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot, sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As the tiger’s body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I’ll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The tiger might want to shake their body to release all that energy. Let’s try doing that together.”

“What was that like to pretend to be the tiger? So, we are no different than the tiger when we are stressed or scared. Sometimes we want to fight too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends or when you are watching a show, if anyone goes into fight just like a tiger?”

Freeze



Script

“Okay, let’s imagine that you are a mouse and that you are being chased by a cat.

Notice your breathing. Is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All these changes are normal. Have you ever noticed them before?”

“If the mouse hid and pretended to freeze like a statue, where would it go to do this? It can’t run and it can’t fight so it freezes.”

“How do think the mouse would feel? (Even though the mouse is very still there is lots of energy going in its body helping it to be still.) What would it be thinking?”

“After a while the mouse notices that it is safe and its body begins to settle.”

“What do you notice as the mouse begins to settle? Does its breathing change? Does its heart start to beat slower? What do you notice in its muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot, sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As the mouse’s body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I’ll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The mouse might want to shake their body to release all that energy. Let’s try doing that together.”

“What was that like to pretend to be the mouse? So, we are no different than the mouse when we are stressed or scared. Sometimes we freeze too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends, or when you are watching a show, if anyone goes into freeze just like a mouse?”

See the Appendix B to read about Getting Playful – In a Larger Space

Appendix A

Pictures to Use When Talking about Flight, Fight and Freeze

Please photocopy or cut them out. The rabbit picture was chosen to show a rabbit running away and to see how its muscles move when it is in flight. We did not want the tiger picture to be too scary, as we want children and youth to remain settled and to have access to their imaginations. The mouse in the picture is surrounded by white to represent the blankness that children and youth describe when they are in freeze.

Rabbit



Tiger



Mouse



Appendix B

Getting More Playful – In a Large Space

When working with younger children, we often play with them to help them learn these ideas. If you have access to a large space you might act out freeze, flight and fight with kids and their caregivers. Please note that it is important that everyone participates, including yourself, and that we focus on using imagination rather than acting out a real experience.

Do this in small steps so that it is manageable for the child and the caregiver. You might only do one of these at a time, or for some children they may be able to do all three. Please make sure the child is settled before you end.

“What would you like to act out as we play freeze, flight or fight?” Let’s say the child chooses flight.
[Prompt: Or if they don’t know what to choose you could suggest you begin with flight.]

Flight



Script

“Okay, imagine that you are a rabbit and that you are being chased. Let’s act out how the rabbit’s legs would run (everyone begins running safely). Notice your breathing, is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All these changes are normal, have you ever noticed them before?”

“How do think that the rabbit would feel? What would it be thinking?”

“When the rabbit is safe what would you begin to notice?”

“What do you notice as your body begins to settle? Does your breathing change? Does your heart start to beat slower? What do you notice in your muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot,

sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As your body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I'll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The rabbit might want to shake their body to release all that energy, let's try doing that together."

"What was that like to pretend to be the rabbit?"

We are no different than the rabbit when we are stressed or scared sometimes we want to run too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends, or when you are watching a show if anyone goes into flight just like a rabbit?"

Fight



Script

"Okay, imagine that you are a tiger and that you are fighting with another tiger. Let's act out how the tiger's legs would run (everyone begins running safely). What would it do with its claws? Would it roar? How about we try roaring?"

Notice your breathing, is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All these changes are normal. Have you ever noticed them before?"

"What sensations do you notice? How do think that the tiger would feel? What would it be thinking?"

"If the tiger decided to stop chasing where would it go to rest?"

"What do you notice as your body begins to settle? Does your breathing change? Does your heart start to beat slower? What do you notice in your muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot,

sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As your body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I'll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The tiger might want to shake their body to release all that energy, let's try doing that together."

"What was that like to pretend to be the tiger?"

We are no different than the tiger when we are stressed or scared sometimes we want to fight too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends, or when you are watching a show if anyone goes into fight just like a tiger?"

Freeze



Script

"Okay, let's imagine that you are a mouse and that you are being chased by a cat. Let's act out how the mouse's legs would run (everyone begins running safely).

Notice your breathing, is it fast or slow? How do your muscles feel? Can you notice your heart beating fast? What about how your muscles feel in your legs; in your chest; in your arms? All these changes are normal. Have you ever noticed them before?"

"If the mouse hid and pretended to freeze like a statue, where would it go to do this? It can't run and it can't fight so it freezes."

"How do think the mouse would feel? (Even though the mouse is very still there is lots of energy going in its body helping it to be still.) What would it be thinking?"

"After a while the mouse notices that it is safe and its body begins to settle."

"What do you notice as your body begins to settle? Does your breathing change? Does your heart start to beat slower? What do you notice in your muscles? [Prompt: Sometimes our muscles feel shaky, hot,

sweaty or tingly? Do you notice any of those sensations?] As your body settles it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly. [Prompt: I'll show you and maybe we can all do the breathing together. Take a regular breath in and then breathe out slowly through your mouth.] The mouse might want to shake their body to release all that energy, let's try doing that together."

"What was that like to pretend to be the mouse?

We are no different than the mouse when we are stressed or scared sometimes we freeze too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences adults and kids. Maybe you could be a detective and notice at school, with friends, or when you are watching a show if anyone goes into freeze just like a mouse?"

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