

# Trauma-Informed Incredible Years® Approaches and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT): Supporting Children Exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

by Carolyn Webster-Stratton, M.S., M.P.H., Ph.D.

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## What is childhood trauma? What are ACEs?

In recent years, we have come to better understand how adversity shapes children’s development—emotionally, socially, and biologically. These stressful or traumatic experiences are often referred to as **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**.

ACEs can include physical or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, parental substance abuse, incarceration, loss of a loved one, separation or divorce, and exposure to disasters (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, tornados, floods or earthquakes) or war. For many families, the effects of COVID-19 are ongoing, with continued stress, disruption, and uncertainty affecting both parents and children.

Children exposed to these experiences may develop heightened fear, anxiety, aggressive behavior, or negative thinking patterns. In my clinical work, I have often seen that these children are also coping with **loss of important relationships**, which can deepen the impact of the trauma.

Research shows that higher exposure to ACEs is associated with long-term risks to both mental and physical health. Children with multiple ACEs are at increased risk for later substance use, involvement in violence, and other health-harming behaviors.

At the same time, I have seen these outcomes are not inevitable. When children and families are supported early with effective, relationship-based interventions, I have seen remarkable resilience emerge and developmental trajectories shift in positive directions.

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## What is Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)?

The following brief overview highlights key elements of TF-CBT most relevant for comparison with the Incredible Years parent, teacher and child programs.

TF-CBT is a well researched and empirically supported treatment for children and families that focuses specifically on reducing trauma-related emotional and behavioral symptoms.

Children receiving TF-CBT may show fear, anxiety, anger, withdrawal, or trauma-related misbehavior, along with unhelpful cognitions such as self-blame or shame. These responses are often triggered by “trauma reminders”—internal or external cues linked to the traumatic experience.

TF-CBT is typically used when trauma is a primary driver of the child's difficulties, and careful assessment is important to confirm this. One of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes is caregiver involvement and emotional support.

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## **How the TF-CBT Model Works**

TF-CBT is a structured, short-term treatment (typically 12–16 sessions) delivered in parallel parent and child sessions, with joint sessions later in treatment.

The PRACTICE components include:

- Psychoeducation and Parenting
- Relaxation
- Affective modulation
- Cognitive coping
- Trauma narration and processing
- In vivo mastery of trauma reminders
- Conjoint sessions
- Enhancing safety and development

Treatment begins with building coping skills and gradually moves toward trauma processing.

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## **TF-CBT Phases (Brief Overview)**

**TF-CBT is often described in three phases:**

### **Phase One: Stabilization and Skill Building**

Children and parents learn about trauma responses, identify triggers, and develop coping skills such as relaxation, emotional awareness, and cognitive coping. Trauma discussion is introduced gradually after these skills are established.

### **Phase Two: Trauma Narration and Processing**

The child gradually develops a trauma narrative, helping reduce emotional reactivity and integrate the experience.

### **Phase Three: Integration and Consolidation**

Includes parent–child sessions, safety planning, and strengthening future coping, with opportunities to share and process the narrative when appropriate.

## Can Incredible Years® (IY) Programs Help Children Exposed to Trauma?

While TF-CBT directly addresses trauma processing, the Incredible Years (IY) Parent, Teacher and Child Programs were designed to address children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, including both externalizing and internalizing problems.

Over several decades of developing and evaluating the Incredible Years programs, I have worked with many families experiencing significant adversity. It has become clear to me that trauma-informed principles are naturally embedded throughout these programs.

The IY programs are not a substitute for TF-CBT when trauma symptoms are primary.

Rather, they can:

- complement TF-CBT, or
- be used before or alongside it to strengthen the foundational relationship and parent and child self-regulation skills

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### IY Parent Programs (Trauma-Informed)

The IY parent program begins with a strong focus on building positive, nurturing parent-child relationships.

Parents learn to:

- use child-directed play
- coach children's emotional literacy, persistence and social skills
- understand the link between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- recognize factors that trigger emotional dysregulation
- respond with predictable, calm, and consistent strategies
- learn which behaviors can be ignored and redirected with distractions, and which behaviors require calm-down strategies



Parents also learn to teach children self-regulation skills such as:

- deep breathing
- positive self-talk
- calming imagery
- problem-solving
- engaging in activities such as exercise, games & singing to support regulation



For these families, more time is often spent on strengthening attachment, responsive and nurturing parenting, predictable routines, and assuring safety before introducing discipline strategies.

When strategies such as ignoring or Time Out to Calm Down are used for destructive or hurtful behavior, they are:

- brief
- attachment informed
- designed to give child time and space to calm down safely
- non-punitive
- followed by positive reconnection
- practiced proactively ahead of time with children

This helps ensure children experience discipline as supportive and predictable, rather than frightening or rejecting.



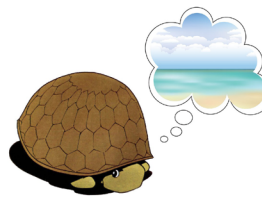
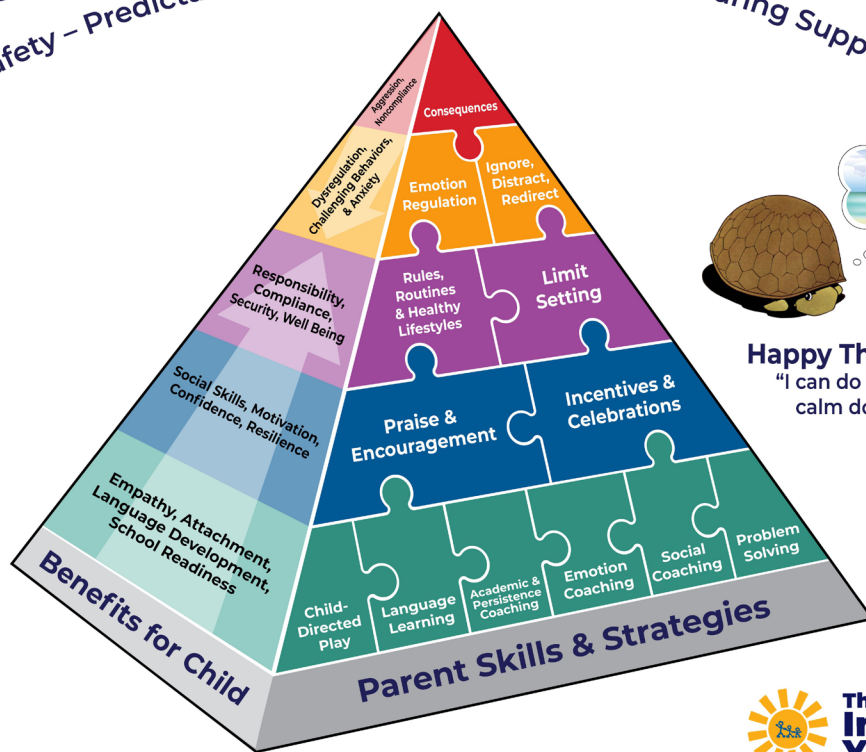
## Promoting Parent Emotional Self-Regulation

Equally important, parents learn to regulate their own emotions—managing stress, challenging negative thoughts, and building support networks through the group process. In my experience, this focus on parent self-regulation is essential to assuring children’s positive mental health outcomes.

See the research library on the IY website for randomized control group trials evaluating IY Parent, Teacher and Child programs. <https://www.incredibleyears.com/research>

## Parenting Pyramid® - Trauma-Informed Lens

Safety – Predictability- Emotional Regulation – Nurturing Support



**Happy Thoughts**  
 "I can do it, I can calm down."



# IY Child (Dinosaur) Programs

In the Dinosaur Program, children learn:

- emotional literacy
- self-regulation
- problem-solving
- friendship skills such as sharing, helping, taking turns, forgiving, waiting, & apologizing
- communication skills



Ask



Give



Wait



Share



Tell



These skills are taught through child-directed play, coaching methods, visual reminders and puppet-based modeling and practice exercises.

The puppets introduce scenarios that reflect real-life challenges, including:

- fear and anxiety
- loneliness
- anger
- family and sibling conflict
- loss or separation
- feeling neglected



BRAVE



NERVOUS



HAPPY



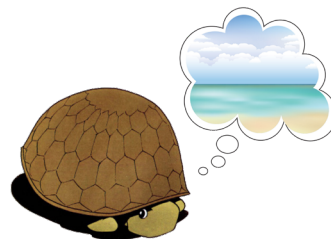
LONELY



LOVED

Children practice:

- deep breathing
- positive self-talk
- imagining calm or “happy” places
- using the Tiny Turtle technique or calm down thermometer
- asking for help and staying safe



By helping the puppets solve problems, children often feel safer exploring difficult emotions and gain a sense of mastery over their own experiences.

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## A Real-World Example

I participated in one primary school classroom in Seattle when an earthquake occurred. These teachers had previously been trained in both the IY Teacher and Child Dinosaur programs. They responded by guiding the children under their desks and encouraged them to take deep breaths using Tiny Turtle’s calming strategies. Because the children had already practiced these skills, they were able to use them in a real moment of stress.

In the weeks that followed, during Dinosaur small groups, Tiny Turtle:

- talked about staying calm
- practiced happy thoughts and visualization
- modeled deep breathing when feeling afraid

## Summary

TF-CBT and the Incredible Years programs offer **complementary approaches** to supporting children exposed to adversity.

- TF-CBT focuses on processing trauma directly
- IY focuses on building relationships, emotional regulation, and everyday coping skills

In my view, many children and families benefit most when these approaches are thoughtfully combined. Several randomized control group studies have shown the added child outcomes with the integration of either the teacher or child IY programs. (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997, Webster-Stratton, Reid & Hammond, 2001, Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2011).

The table below highlights how these two approaches differ in focus while complementing one another in practice.

## Comparison Table

### “Key Similarities and Differences”

<b>Incredible Years (Trauma-informed Approach)</b>	<b>TF-CBT Approach</b>
Build's parent-child relationships and attachment	Focuses on processing specific trauma experiences and symptoms
Teaches self-regulation skills (e.g., self-talk, breathing, imagery)	Teaches similar coping skills within a trauma-focused framework
Emphasizes emotion coaching, persistence, and social competence	Emphasizes trauma understanding and cognitive processing
Uses puppets, play, and guided practice to explore feelings safely	Uses structured trauma narration and processing
Delivered in group-based formats for parents and children	Delivered as individual therapy with caregiver involvement
Does not require trauma disclosure or exposure	Includes gradual trauma narration and exposure
Uses predictable routines and non-punitive discipline	Emphasizes processing trauma-related thoughts and reactions
Builds social support networks and reduces isolation	Targets reduction of trauma-specific symptoms
Can be used alone or alongside trauma-focused treatment	Used when trauma symptoms are the primary clinical concern



## Hot Tips for Developing Relationships with Trauma-Exposed Children



- Focus on relationships first. Connection is the foundation for healing.
  - Stay calm, predictable, and patient—consistency builds trust
  - Watch for triggers. Behavior often reflects underlying fear or stress.
  - Teach and practice coping skills regularly when children are calm:
    - deep breathing
    - positive self-talk
    - calming imagery
    - problem-solving
  - Use emotion and social coaching across settings
  - Model emotional self-regulation.
  - Know when to refer for TF-CBT if trauma symptoms are primary.
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### Concluding Reflections

Over the years, I have worked with many children and families whose lives have been shaped by adversity. What stands out most is not only the challenges they face, but their remarkable capacity for resilience when they are supported with the right tools and relationships.

Children do not recover from trauma in isolation. They recover in the context of safe, predictable, and nurturing relationships.

TF-CBT offers a structured way to process trauma. The Incredible Years programs help build the daily interactions, emotional language, and self-regulation skills that make that healing possible.

In IY groups, I have often seen small but meaningful changes—parents pausing before reacting, children taking a breath instead of lashing out, families beginning to enjoy time together again.

These moments may seem simple, but they are powerful. They are the building blocks of resilience.

When we support parents, teach children practical coping strategies, and create environments where children feel understood and safe, we are not only addressing problems—we are helping children develop the skills they need for lifelong emotional health.

Over time, I have come to see that when we support parents, teachers, and children together, we are not only addressing immediate problems—we are helping children develop skills for lifelong emotional health.

This is hopeful work. And it makes a lasting difference.