



# Dimensions of Safety Planning in the Parent-Child Relationship

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# YWCA Utah

**The YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.**

## **We Offer:**

- Crisis Line: 801-537-8600
- Walk-in services through the Salt Lake Area Family Justice Center
- Crisis Shelter
- Supportive Housing
- Specialized services for children



# The Children's Center

- Non-profit agency serving Salt Lake, Kearns, and surrounding areas for over 50 years
- Provide therapy for children and their families from birth to 6 years old
  - Therapeutic style is attachment-focused and family-focused
  - Treatment is individualized and tailored to the unique needs of the child and family
  - Multiple evidence-based trauma treatments are offered
- Therapeutic Preschool Program for children ages 2 to 5 years
  - 3 hours, 5 days a week of intensive group therapy focused on increasing children's emotional and behavioral regulation skills
- Outpatient social skills groups
  - Utilizes the evidence-based Incredible Years model
- Early Childhood Consultation and Training Program
  - Consultation, training, mentoring, and coaching for early childcare providers, teachers, and programs
- Affiliate with National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

# Presentation Objectives

1. Recognize the challenges associated with empowering caregivers to be a resource for safety for their children.
2. Explore ways to engage caregivers and children in creating safety plans.
3. Understand the multiple layers to safety and how to promote emotional safety.

# Safety

## What is Safety?

- Clients should be empowered to define safety for themselves.
- The meaning of safety is ultimately ecologically driven.
- The meaning of safety is not static and may evolve over one's life.

# Safety

- Domains of safety:
  1. Physical
  2. Social
  3. Psychological
  4. Moral
- Discussions about safety provide opportunities for psychoeducation

# Safety

“How do people learn what is safe and what is not safe, what is inside and what is outside, what should be resisted and what can safely be taken in?”

van der Kolk, 2014

- How do you help an individual understand what safety is when they have no frame of reference for this experience?
- How does this happen over time?
- How does an individual begin to believe they deserve to be safe?

# Trauma

## Biological impact of trauma

1. Brain Biology 101
  - Brain anatomy
  - How does the brain respond to trauma?
2. The alarm system
  - Physiological response
  - Fight, flight, freeze



# Trauma

## Sustained hypervigilance

1. When the alarm system becomes overwhelmed
2. Impact on ability to maintain safety
3. Impact on relationships
4. Impact on parenting capacity

# Safety in Crisis

How do you talk about safety with someone who is in crisis?

1. Recognize the limitations of what they can absorb. Offer concrete cueing and references.
2. Reflect and validate their emotional experience.
3. Address affect regulation, while recognizing limitations of ability of complex trauma survivors to do so in the immediate aftermath of trauma.
4. Emphasize importance of readiness.
5. Use the relationship as a path toward healing.

# Parents as Protective Factors

## Validation, Support & Psychoeducation

- Parents have capacity to support healing
  - Best way to help a child is to first help the parent
- Model aspects of secure base for parent
  - Normalize reactions to experiences
  - Provide support (tangible and intangible)
  - Encourage autonomy and agency
  - Hold the parent in mind
  - Be flexible and adaptive in response styles
    - Nurturing, Containing, Directive, etc.

# Parents as Protective Factors

## Modeling how to sit with discomfort

- DV leaves people feeling powerless
  - Parental guilt associated with exposure
    - Layers can be present (e.g., abuse, homelessness, etc.)
- Providers often feel powerless to change things
  - Can get lost in the minutiae of safety planning or resource coordination
- Uncomfortable for everyone to sit with reality; with complicated feelings
- If we as providers cannot, how can parents?

# Parents as Protective Factors

## Shifting from powerlessness to motivation

- Parents can experience guilt due to exposure
  - Guilt can immobilize people (behaviorally & affectively)
  - Sometimes guilt is buried under denial (e.g., child never heard or saw anything; was not affected)
- Providers must strike a balance
  - Directly confronting guilt can be counterproductive
  - Not challenging assumptions can maintain powerlessness
- Planting seeds of hope can nullify immobilizing effects of guilt
  - How to create a different experience for child
  - How to shape a different future for child

# Parents as Protective Factors

## Using motivation as momentum to empower

- Focus on what is in parent's control
  - Comprehensive safety planning
  - Expanding focus to include emotional safety
- Highlight the repair periods
  - When and where are the moments providers can help facilitate repair between parent & child
- Emphasis placed on helping the parent feel confident; the “expert” on their child

# Promoting Emotional Safety

## Start with what you see

- Label what you observe the parent doing
- Focus on noticing strengths to build parental sense of competence
- Provide benevolent interpretations when possible
  - Of child's behavior and of parent's behavior
- Pay particular attention to attachment-focused behaviors (e.g., reflection, praise, scaffolding)

# Promoting Emotional Safety

## Safety through containment

- Providing containment to the parent can help them experience safety
- Encouraging routines, rituals, and predictability whenever possible
  - Modeling it for parents when needed through service provision



# Promoting Emotional Safety

## Safety through affect identification & expression

- Goal is to increase parent's and child's comfort and skill in talking about and expressing emotions
- Using structured, supported play activities can be a contained “sandbox” to explore feelings
- Tie affect to “real-life” experiences that aren't likely to be triggering (e.g., broken toy)
- As parent and child skills increase, tie affect with past events that may be triggering

# Promoting Emotional Safety

## Safety through attunement & affect regulation

- Goal is to increase parent's ability to accurately identify child's affective state and sensitively respond to the child's needs (and not the behavior)
- Model how to reflect child's feelings and narrate their experience; promote verbal processing
- Encourage/Acknowledge times of shared affect
  - “I was scared, too.”
- Key to success is parent's ability to manage emotions

# Safety Planning

How do you talk with the child about safety planning?

## **Start with the parent!**

- Parental consent and buy-in
- Parental affect regulation
- Do not shy away from calling it what it is
- Consider developmental stage of child

# Safety Planning

## Parental Consent, Buy-In and Affect Regulation:

1. Consider parent's reflective capacity
2. Reflect on intergenerational pattern
3. Name and validate parent's desire to protect child(ren)
4. Do not shy away from calling it what it is
5. Acknowledge limitations when in crisis
6. Reinforce parent safety plan

# Safety Planning

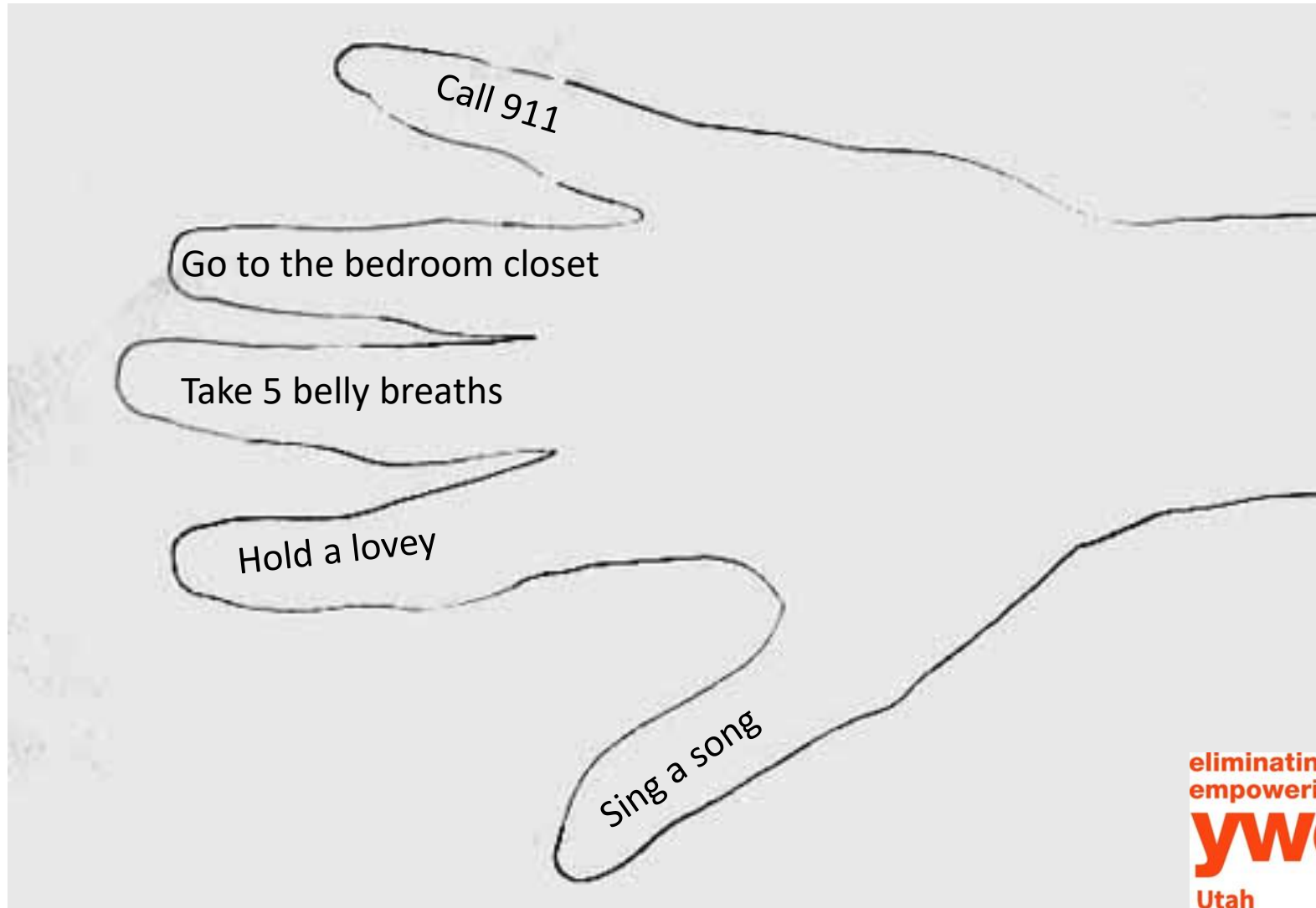
Developmental stage of the child:

1. More than just age, due to impact of trauma on child development
2. Child's capacity for initiating use of plan
3. Identify cues that match child's development, such as visual or written
4. Trauma symptom considerations: fight, flight, freeze

# Developing a Safety Plan

1. Consider current safety and need for plan.
  - Are they in shelter?
  - Are their caregiver safety concerns in shelter ?
  - What is the caregiver's capacity to support the child?
  - Is the family exiting shelter soon?
2. Content it should entail:
  - Physical safety and regulation
  - Emotional safety and regulation

# Example 1: Young Child

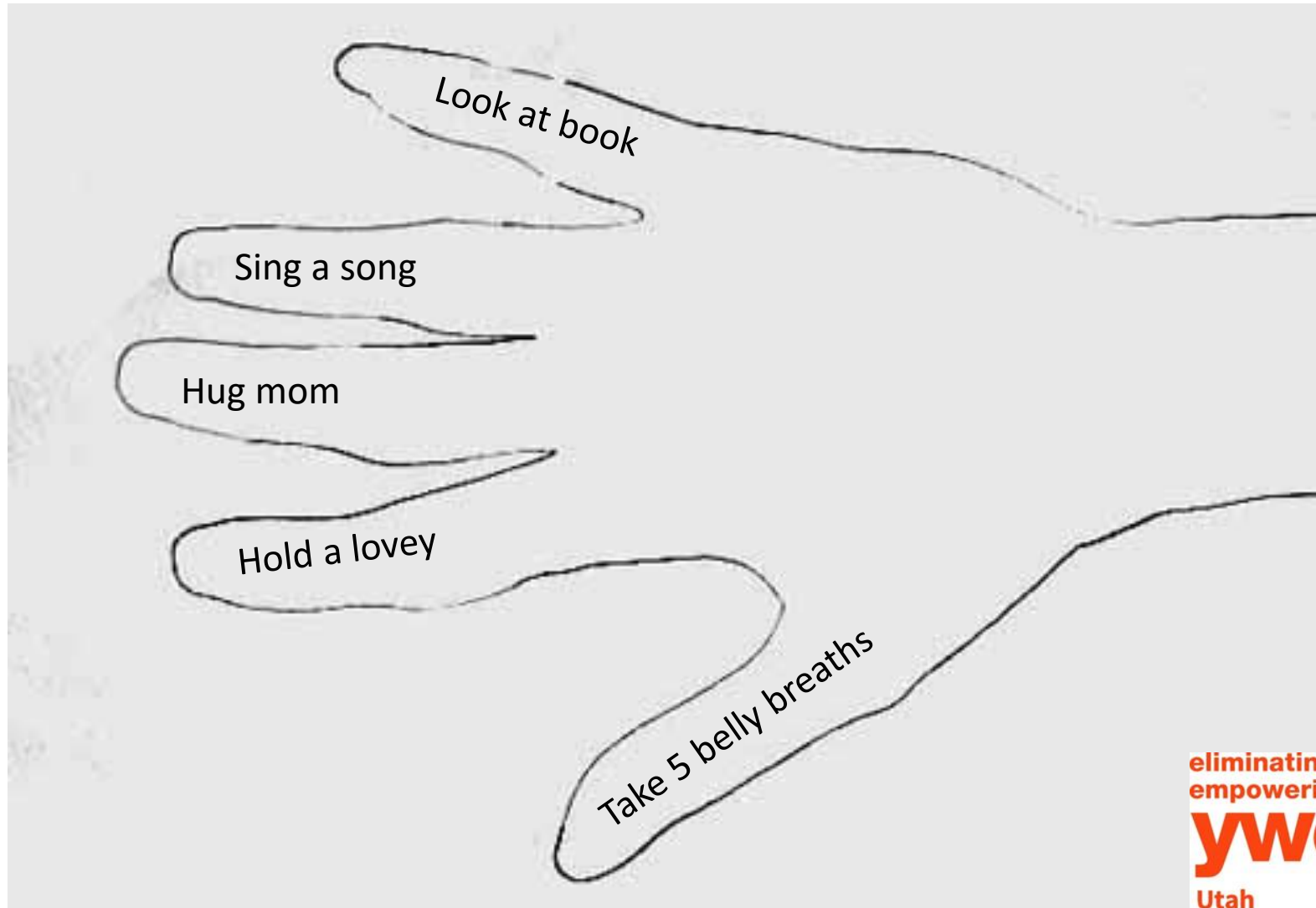


# Example 1: Older Child

1. Call 911
2. Go to bathroom and lock the door
3. Take deep breaths
4. Draw a picture
5. Think about favorite place: grandma's house-  
what do you hear, what do you see, how  
does it smell



# Example 2: Young child



## Example 2: Older child

1. Take deep breaths
2. Think about favorite place: grandma's house-  
what do you hear, what do you see, how  
does it smell
3. Call my aunt
4. Listen to music
5. Draw a picture

# Implementation

1. Post in a safe place
2. Prepare supplies in safe place
3. Talk about it
  - manage parental affect
  - name the emotions
4. Practice
  - How does this look without being triggered?



# Questions?

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