

**Playing with Fire:
An Intervention Focused on Play and Playfulness
for Toddlers and Families under Rocket Fire**

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Posttraumatic play associated with PTSD symptoms:

(Cohen, Chazen, Lerner & Maimon, 2010; Chazan & Cohen, 2010)

- Repetitive reenactment of traumatic or aggressive themes without soothing
- Chaotic play with loss of control (overwhelmed re-experiencing)
- Regressive play or play avoidance
- Low awareness of oneself as playing

Elements of resilient posttraumatic play

- The ability to engage in play
- The ability to plan and construct a coherent and satisfying plan or narrative
- Capacities for self-soothing
- Using the relationship with an available adult

Elements of Playfulness

(Bundy, 1997)

- Inner motivation- to engage in play without external reward
- Inner control- the player is responsible for the play activities and some of the consequences, he is creative and in charge (awareness of self as player)
- Freedom to suspend reality
- Framing- The player organizes a frame and inner rules for the play that are coherent and can be shared with the other player (a code)

**The “Namal” (PORT) Program:
Parents as a safe haven for young children**

P-O-R-T- Playful Opportunities Restored Together

Esther Cohen, Ph.D.

and the Israeli Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma

Program objectives: to promote secure attachment, positive affect, regulatory and coping capacities, through play and playfulness in parent child relationships, in the shadow of repeated missile and mortar fire.

Group format: 10 sessions ; 8-10 parent-toddler dyads

Sessions plan: Themes and messages

Session 1 – Theme: The importance of secure attachment for positive personality development.

Proverb: *If we look at something with love - it becomes beautiful*

Message: The Parent-Child-Relationship is the basis for the child’s perceptions of himself and others; it is important for parents to spend exclusive time together with the child, to delight in the child, to be emotionally available, to sooth, regulate and to mediate experiences.

Session 2 – Theme: The importance of autonomy support

Proverb: *All a child needs is one adult who believes in him/her*

Message: Promote the child’s strivings for autonomy and self-reliance by focusing on the child’s interests and motivations, encouraging and patiently facilitating independent coping, and appreciating the process and not only the outcome.

Session 3 – Theme: The importance of play and playfulness

Proverb: *In order to play, all you need are a good imagination and a pile of junk*

Message: Playful interactions can be achieved through a variety of play objects (no need for fancy toys), movement, gestures, music, words and ideas. Promote playfulness, creativity, imagination, humor. They are important for enjoyment, strengthening relationships, diffusing stress, developing cognitive and social flexibility.

Session 4 – Theme: The advantage of a focus on the Positive and on accepting the uniqueness of the child.

Proverb: *Always focus on the bagel and not on the hole, otherwise you may remain hungry*

Message: Use observation and reflection to validate the child's plans, choices, effort, achievements and feelings; this will help the child experience and develop self-esteem and self-acceptance.

Session 5 – Theme: The importance of helping children express and share painful, fearful and unpleasant affects

Proverb: *Things that you keep to yourself inside your belly may give you a tummy-ache*

Message: Be attentive to identify your child's difficult emotions and encourage their expression verbally or non-verbally. Talking with children about fears and other unpleasant feelings reduces the child's loneliness, helps normalize, understand, accept and regulate the feelings; it allows to correct misconceptions and to problem-solve. Ignoring fears does not make them go away.

Session 6 – Theme: Parents alone: Helping the helpers to help

Proverb: *Because God was too busy, he created parents*

Message: Processing your own stress and posttraumatic feelings and discussing ways to regulate them is a precondition to your ability as a parent to help the children regulate their feelings and behavior; Transitional objects, rituals and play are important for children's self-regulation.

Preparation of a "surprise box" with soothing objects for the child

Session 7 – Theme: Play and playfulness are helpful in the shadow of uncontrollable traumatic events.

Proverb: *Imagination is one of the best weapons in the struggle against reality*

Message: Playing with your child offers a pleasurable diversion in stressful times; the mind can transport us to better places. It is important to cultivate the ability to imagine a good future or outcome. Play develops the ability to use symbolic processing of intense experiences, which allows for better resilience.

Session 8 – Theme: The complexity of understanding children's inner experiences and their behavioral expressions

Proverb: *The heart has a mind of its own, which the mind cannot sometimes comprehend*

Message: The child needs the help of the parent to understand and create a narrative around unusual, confusing and anxiety-arousing experiences. Help your child to engage in creative or make-believe play and in playful, soothing interactions; help children introduce coherence and "protection themes" in chaotic play.

Sessions 9 and 10 – Theme: The importance of adhering to and valuing long term parenting goals in a supportive human network

Proverb: *There are two inheritances we can bestow unto our children: One is roots, the other is wings*

Message: Parents can achieve seemingly conflicting yet complementary parenting goals through the use of intimate play interactions with their

children: a sense of human connectedness and stability together with a sense of agency, strivings and hopefulness

Session 9 – Inviting significant others to the group

Session 10 – Concluding, reviewing, and saying good-byes

Project Research and Evaluation tools:

- **Parental report questionnaires:**
 - Parenting Stress Index (PSI: Abidin, 1995)
 - Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC: Johnston & Mash, 1989)
 - Post-traumatic Diagnostic Scale (PDS: Foa, Feske & Murdock 1993)
 - Exposure to traumatic events: Parent + Child
 - Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983)
 - Socio-economic and cultural information
 - Satisfaction and evaluation of the program questionnaire and interviews
- **Video recordings of parent-toddler free play interaction** – coded in two ways:
 - Test of Playfulness (TOP: Bundy, 2003) was designed to evaluate the level of playfulness in children aged 6 months to 18 years, with or without disabilities.
 - Emotional Availability Scales (3rd ed.; an abridged Infancy/Early Childhood Version; (Biringen, Robinson and Emde, 2000)
- **Audio recordings: The Five Minutes Speech Sample (FMSS: Magana et al., 1986)** – coded in two ways:

- A brief measure of Expressed Emotion, adapted in recent years to assess the relationships between parents and pre-school children (Preschool-FMSS; Daley, 2001, Daley et al., 2003). Coding Expressed emotion (EE) focuses on distinct content components of the speech sample: criticism (CRIT) and emotional over-involvement (EOI).
- Narrative coherence: a new coding system, based on the Insightfulness Assessment Coherence Scale (Koren-Karie & Oppenheim, 2004), which was adapted for the FMSS to assess the degree to which mothers conveyed a consistent, complex, and believable picture of their child (Efrat Sher-Censor, 2010).