

# GROUNDBREAKING INTERVENTIONS: WORKING WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN FOSTER CARE & ADOPTION

Interventions for Therapists, Social Workers, and Parents to heal Anxiety, Fear, Worry, Stress, Anger, Aggressivity, Frustration, Poor Impulse Control, Grief, Loss, and Depression, in order to build Self-esteem, Identity Formation, Family, Trust, Safety, Security, Attachment and Bonding with Attachment Challenged Children.

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# **PROJECT: SAD BAG**

**AGE RANGE:** 5-12 suggested

**GOAL:** To get child to utilize coping skills when he/she feels sad emotionally in order to learn how to problem solve and regulate themselves on their own.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Feeling sad, depressed, or hopeless.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Self-awareness, self-esteem, self-regulation, and self-reliance.

## **MATERIALS:**

- 1 Bag with Handles
- Tear Pillow
- Magical Wish Journal
- Paper to draw with crayons
- Small Photo Album
- 1 pack of Guatemalan Worry Dolls
- Bubbles
- 8 Index Cards for Sad Busters
- Markers

## **METHOD:**

Introduce the task by explaining to the child that he/she is going to help child gain control of these “sad” feelings with the use of a special bag they will explore and create together. Continue to explain that within the bag there will be special skills for him/her to do when they have these feelings and don’t know how to express them. Order is not important.

**Tear Pillow:** The Tear pillow is used to help a child express their sadness verbally and to be used for self comfort and care. The parent/therapist/social worker can demonstrate first by placing their face in the middle of the pillow and start by making sounds of sadness i.e. sighing, boo-hoo-ing, pretending to cry, all the while encouraging the child to try. Then as the child begins to feel more comfortable he/she can say words such as “I am sad” or “It’s not fair” or “I am hurt” or “I feel sad.”

**Magical Wish Journal:** The journal is used as a diary to express sad feelings. The child is told that the Magical journal can bring magic into their life when they write down their wishes. Whenever they write their wishes into their journal amazing things will happen, the angels will hear them and angels can only listen to Magic Wish journals. Sometimes so many angels hear them and their wishes come true.

**Paper to Draw:** The child is told the “Paper to Draw” is used to draw pictures about their sad feelings. The child can draw pictures of the person and event and/or write words, which express his/her pain. (See attached Paper to Draw Cover page for drawing book.)

**Small Photo Album:** This is used for the child to put pictures of people and/or things that make him/her happy. This can be “real” pictures of loved ones in their life or pictures of persons/places/things from magazines i.e. cartoon characters, flowers, funny pictures. The child can title the album i.e. “Things that make me smile” “The people who love me in my life.” “I am always loved.” “I can be happy.”

**1 pack of Guatemalan Worry Dolls:** These are used for the child to express their concerns, worries and fears into an external object. I like to introduce the dolls as “powerful Friends,” who can help us with our feelings but we have to tell them what we are upset about one by one so that they can discuss it that evening. The “powerful friends” must be placed under their pillow while they are sleeping and if they listen really hard they can hear them talking their sadness away and when they wake up in the morning they will feel better.

**Bubbles Blow-away-disappear technique:** The bubbles are used for blowing, of course. The child is instructed to sit down in a chair while performing this task. He/she is going to imagine seeing the stressful feelings enter the bubble and then disappear when it pops. Encourage the child to focus, feel the lightness of the bubble gliding within their control. Each bubble he/she blows they watch until it pops, so that the child begins to regain focus and internalize a sense of calm.

**Sad Busters:** The child with the help of the parent/therapist/social worker will create 3-8 Sad Busters and write them on the card. These are also stored in the bag and the child is told he/she can reach in the bag and pick one out at anytime and they will tell him/her what to do with their stress.

**Examples of Sad Busters are:**

1. CROSS my ARMS around my body and give myself a big, BIG HUG!!!
2. SAY the TONGUE twister: “Silly sally, sang dilly dallies sitting on a swing.” OUT LOUD 10 times!!!
3. CRY on my Tear Pillow and let the RAINBOW catch my TEARS for me!!!
4. TAKE 5 deep breathes SLOWLY.
5. WRITE my SAD feelings in my JOURNAL.
6. ASK my parent for a HUG!!!
7. GO to MY mirror and make a funny face REALLY BIG!!!
8. GO get my BUBBLES and BLOW 3 wishes into the air!!!

At the end all of the items are placed back in the bag and the child or parent/therapist/social worker writes on the outside of the bag “Things to do when I feel sad to make my broken heart feel glad!” The child keeps the bag within reach, hanging on a doorknob or hook in his/her room.

## **PROJECT: MOTHER MAY I WITH HULA HOOPS**

**AGE RANGE:** 5-15 suggested.

**GOAL:** To get child to instill boundaries, foster open/clear communication, and learn impulse control with self and others.

**THERAPY:** Individual, Family and Small group (max 6 players).

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Impulsivity, aggressivity, poor impulse control and anxiety.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Boundary setting, impulse control, and problem solving skills.

### **MATERIALS:**

Hula Hoops (as many as there are players, including parent)

Reward point chips (pennies, poker chips etc.)

Rule chart

Assortment of toys- stuffed animals, toy cars, dolls, action figures, balls.

### **METHOD:**

The parent/therapist/social worker places the hula-hoops down on the ground and each child or family member picks a hula-hoop and is instructed to sit inside them. All sorts of toys are laid out around the hula-hoops for all to see but are told they cannot touch them until the game begins. The parent/therapist/social worker is given the reward point chips and serves as “the Mother.” The child is told this is the Mother May I, Hula Hoops game where they are going to earn points for stopping, relaxing, and thinking. A good idea is to create an incentive for the child, for example if they earn 30 points they will earn a “special time with parent” (this is discussed with the parent), which could be i.e. make ice cream sundaes together, go for a bike ride together, etc. Then the child is given the rules of the game. (See attached Rules List) The points can be changed depending upon the behavior you want to target. I will give a few examples for you.

Each category represents important skills for children to learn: listening, following instructions, sharing, giving, engaging, respecting and maintaining self-control.

After the child chooses their action they are asked what they earned points for, which creates and instills an “awareness of self” and actions taken. Most children tend to really enjoy this game. The hula-hoops give them a container in order to feel secure, and the rules give them a structure to adhere to all the while earning and being rewarded for their efforts. This game is especially useful with children who have major control issues and create intense power struggles with parents. I have seen dramatic results with children of this nature who have been able to stop impulsivity and think before their actions.

To Note: Teaching Boundaries with Hula Hoops:

The idea of the hula-hoop began when I was wondering how to teach children about the concept of boundaries. As part of the Mother May I game I do an educational piece, telling children that we are surrounded by our own hula hoops meaning we all have “imaginary hula hoops in the world” and no one can enter our hula hoops without our permission and we cannot enter other people’s hula hoops without their permission. So when playing the game, I encourage the child to notice how big their hula-hoops are, how much space they have around them and the space around others to understand the concept of personal space, where they end and others begin. Children are able, after explaining this concept, to understand personal boundaries for themselves and others.

**PROJECT: All About Me Affirmation Cards**

**AGE RANGE:** 8-17 suggested.

**GOAL:** To get child to restructure cognitive distortions about themselves internally and externally, while build coping skills.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Fear, worry, depression, low self-esteem and anxiety.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Patience, control, self-reliance, self-confidence, and inner-peace.

**MATERIALS:**

Self-lamination cards or Magnet sheets  
Paper-white or colored  
Markers  
Scissors  
Stickers

**METHOD:**

Tell the child they are going to create “Me Cards” that will state affirmations for them to read, hold, or carry with them to help bring their spirits up and motivate them when they feel down to instill an overall sense of well-being. Trace the lamination card/magnet on a piece of paper and cut it out. Then write an affirmation on the card and design with stickers or drawings. Social worker can help child create affirmations and encourage child to create ones for them selves.

Some affirmations are:

*“I am wonderful wherever I go.”      “I can find the love I need.”*  
*“It’s OK for me to get angry!”      “I am doing the best I can everyday.”*  
*“I can make friends by listening.”      “I am lovable and capable.”*  
*“I have strength/courage to make my dreams come true.”      “I am beautiful in every way.”*  
*“I can breath to get calm.”      “I am confident and make good choices for myself.”*  
*“Each day is a new beginning.”      “My feelings are important.”*  
*“Love with always stay in your heart.”      “Angels are always watching over you.”*

## **PROJECT: FEELINGS SNOW GLOBE**

**AGE RANGE:** 4-17 suggested.

**GOAL:** To teach about the neuroscience of the brain, learn communication skills, and utilize a snow globe to practice breathing and self-regulation.

**THERAPY:** Individual and Family.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Fear, worry, depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Patience, control, self-reliance, self-confidence, and inner-peace.

**MATERIALS:** Finger Animal Puppets assortment and/or Washable markers  
Finger Ring Google eyes (Party City)  
Empty large water bottle, stickers off  
Glitter in Blue, Red, Yellow, Purple and Gold  
Glycerin from a drugstore  
Glue

### **METHOD:**

Explain to the child they are going to learn about how “our” brains work so they can understand what drives “our” feelings and what we “can” do to help ourselves. Have them draw an animal on their thumb with markers or place a finger puppet on their thumb and google eyes.

1. Watch 4.5 minute YouTube Video *Hand Model of the Brain for Kids* by Mrs. Yoffe  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_dxnYhdyuY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_dxnYhdyuY)
2. Teach and practice “I messages” holding the finger puppet and google eyes  
**“I FEEL ...” basic feelings...**Say “I FEEL ...” SAD, MAD, SCARED, or GLAD  
**“I NEED ...” 5 basic needs...the 5 A’s...**Say “I NEED....” AUTONOMY OR ALONE TIME, AFFECTION, ATTENTION, APPRECIATION, AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.
3. Watch 4.5 minute YouTube Video *Just Breathe* made by Kids  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>
4. Explain to the child they are going to get to make a “Feelings Snow Globe” to practice slowing down, taking their time to breath to calm down their brain. The water bottle is filled up with water leaving some room at the top. Each color represents a feeling, Blue is sad, Red is mad, Yellow is happy, Purple is scared and Green is irritated. For each glitter tube, ask the child to tap their feelings into their globe, one by one. I encourage children to share about that feeling and put words to it. After all feelings are placed in, the therapist/parent places 2 teaspoons of glycerin, which is a thick liquid that will allow the glitter to move slowly. The top can be sealed with glue. Practice shaking the snow globe, have the child sit, watch the feelings settle and practice breathing. Either using a lavender oil to breathe in or have them imagine breathing in the smell of their birthday cake.

# **PROJECT: MY QUESTIONS & ANSWERS BOX**

**AGE RANGE:** 4-17 suggested.

**GOAL:** To get child to externalize unanswered questions about his/her life in foster care and adoption and also provide a container for their anxiety.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Anxiety, helplessness, and confusion.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Empowerment, understanding, and self-esteem.

## **MATERIALS:**

2 boxes of any kind with tops  
Small sheets of paper  
Pen or pencil  
Materials to decorate box, colored paper, fabric, stickers

## **METHOD:**

Introduce the first box to the child as the "Question Box" which is going to hold all of the child's questions about their life that he/she has always had. Introduce the second box as the "Answers Box" which is going to hold any answers found out about their life. The child is encouraged to decorate and name each special box for themselves as to create significance and importance. The child is then instructed to write questions down on the pieces of paper and place them in to the Question box. It is important to tell the child that "sometimes we will never know all the answers but we at least have a place to hold the questions other than inside us all the time to help carry the load." The box may be shown to a parent, social worker or the child's attorney or any professional who may have answers about the child's past. The answers can be placed in the Answers Box for the child to read or in their Life Book. Examples of questions are:

*Why am I in foster care?  
What happened to my mommy or daddy?  
Do I have any brothers or sisters?  
Why did my mommy give me up?  
Where is my mommy now?  
Who is my daddy?  
Can I get a picture of my mommy or daddy?  
If the child has had multiple placements:  
What happened to my foster family?  
Is this my forever family?  
Can I write a letter to my foster family?  
Why couldn't they keep me?*

## **PROJECT: CANDLE RITUAL**

**AGE RANGE:** 13-17 suggested.

***NOTE:** THIS INTERVENTION MUST BE SUPERVISED AND GRANTED PERMISSION BY THE PARENT TO DO SO AS THIS USES MATCHES/FIRE.*

**GOAL:** To get teen to symbolize their biological family and their journey thus far.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Anxiety, helplessness, and confusion.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Empowerment, understanding, and self-esteem.

### **MATERIALS:**

Candle/Matches  
Stickers  
Letter writing paper  
Pencil or Pen  
Aluminum Tin Pan and Matches

### **METHOD:**

Introduce to the teen that they are going to create/decorate a candle and designate who the candle represents, “their biological mother or their biological father.” Use the stickers to decorate the candle. Then with the supervision of an adult, light the candle and ask the teen to sit and bask in its warmth for a few minutes to make a connection. Then encourage the teen to begin to write a letter to one of their biological parents. Tell them to include everything they didn't get a chance to say or what they want to share with them now. This can include feelings of loss, sadness, regret, guilt, worry, fear, rage, joy, and words of thanks. It can be a story of what is happening in their life now. Or anything they want to share with them. When they are finished writing the letter, ask them to take a moment and read the letter out loud (twice). Then when they are ready they can light the letter on fire and place the letter into the aluminum pan while watching it burn into flames.

Process with Teen:

The physical action of giving life to your feelings by putting them into words (when you write the letter), hearing your own words (as you read the letter out loud)...and then finally, launch them into the universe (by tossing them into the fire) is symbolic of the permission you have given yourself to express your truth and then let it go, an opportunity for you to share your unsaid words, wishes, and feelings to your biological parent by launching them into the universe.”

## **PROJECT: MY FAMILY TREE**

**AGE RANGE:** 5-13 suggested.

**GOAL:** To get child to create a narrative about their foster and/or adoption story, sequence their life events while gaining understanding and awareness.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Post-traumatic stress, confusion, worry, fear, and shame.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Confidence, self-compassion, and objectivity.

### **MATERIALS:**

Poster Board  
Tree stencil or can draw a tree free hand or tracing your hand with your arm as the trunk  
As accurate a List of Placements the child has had with dates  
Colored paper cut out in the shapes of houses (equal to # of placements)

Construction paper  
Markers  
Glue  
Scissors

### **METHOD:**

Explain to the child and/or family that together you are going to create a narrative about his/her life. The child is instructed to start at the bottom of the poster board to make a tree. The bottom tree is the biological family tree, their “roots.” They are then instructed to write each biological family member’s name on a leaf and add it to the tree. The next step is to continue above the biological family tree. The child is instructed to glue either another tree or a house to signify their next move. Again, they are instructed to write each foster family member’s name on a leaf and add it to the tree. The child is instructed to continue to make the persons in his 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> family (as many placements as he/she can remember). Multiple poster boards can be taped together to keep the flow and consistency of the child’s narrative. At each placement, it is important to write next to the tree or house, the dates the child lived there, the name of the family and any important information about the experience there. The child can also color and design the homes as he/she remembers them. When the mapping of the placements, trees and houses are done the child can continue to decorate, add photos, color feelings next to each family or write words to continue to process/express their thoughts/feelings. The parent/therapist/social worker will guide the child through their story and multiple placements by asking such questions as: “Where did you begin your journey?” “What do you remember about that home/family?” “What was the best part?” “What was the worst part?” “Where did you move to next?” “What happened that you had to move?” “What was it like in your new home?” The story continues until he/she ends up at their current placement.

## **PROJECT: HOLD ONTO MY FEELINGS**

**AGE RANGE:** 4-17 suggested.

**GOAL:** To provide opportunity for family to create a safe and warm holding environment, build trust and secure the attachment.

**SYMPTOM REDUCTION:** Lack of trust/safety, reactive attachment, & anxiety.

**SYMPTOM INCREASE:** Trust, love, bonding, and attachment.

### **MATERIALS:**

Old Phone Book  
New Pillowcase  
Permanent Markers

### **METHOD:**

To begin, the intervention can be introduced by therapist/parent as “We have noticed you have been holding onto a lot of ‘feelings’ and wanted to give you a way to release these feelings by letting you rip up this old phone book. And guess who is going to clean up and hold onto all of the feelings??? Not you, we are.” The therapist/parent then playfully entices the child to participate by demonstrating the task first i.e. opening the phone book, ripping out a few pages at a time, ripping or smashing the paper apart or together, stating an example of what they are feeling such as “I’m mad because I can’t drink soda for breakfast!!” and/or by showing their frustration/anger/pain without words via their facial cues by throwing the pages up in the air and watching them fall down. Making it seem fun and cathartic is the critical element that gets children to begin the process of releasing their pent up feelings. It is strongly suggested that therapists/parents encourage the child to say words associated with their feelings to help them build emotional intelligence by teaching “I” messages. “I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.” But do not force the child if they are non-verbal, their resistance may be a signal that they are not ready emotionally or are not feeling safe enough to verbalize at this time. Also, I recommend beginning the intervention with light-hearted feelings and complaints, allowing the child to feel comfortable with the process before digging in to more painful core issues.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to create an environment of safety. To do this it is important for therapists/parents to be very aware of their own state of being and not to be reactive. When successful, this intervention brings up many deep and repressed emotions and feelings that can be painful and even shocking to hear. Sometimes a child might say, “I wish I was never adopted”, or “You’re not my real parents”. Let the child express their feelings without criticism, rejection,

anger or dismissal. It is also important to keep in mind how one's own non-verbal facial expressions, and actions read to others. It is suggested to keep an open, stress free face, be overly curious (raised eyebrows), and breathe deeply during the exercise to help calm down and regulate any arousal states the child brings out in order to stay connected. Therapists/Parents are encouraged to enjoy the child's process by "ooing" and "aaahing" with amazement as the child rips up the paper. This is a necessary part of the intervention as active and verbal support keeps the parent connected and engaged while simultaneously increasing the levels of the oxytocin hormone, essential for bonding.

A good tip is to bring a small journal or notebook into the intervention. If, as a therapist/parent, you are becoming deregulated and/or overwhelmed, take a moment to write down what it is that is triggering you and you can revisit those notes at a later time. Remember, this exercise purposely manifests painful feelings in order to allow for a stronger emotional connection and feeling of trust.

If the child is resisting, some prompting is appropriate. I encourage therapists/parents of a reluctant child to ask, "Would you be willing to let mommy or daddy speak a feeling you have said before so we can feel it together?" i.e. "I'm mad because I don't see my biological mother!" "I'm sad because we don't look alike." "I'm sad because I didn't grow in your tummy!" "I'm sad because you are not my real mother." "I'm mad because I have so many feelings and I feel so overwhelmed!" Doing this often entices the child to participate.

Don't feel the need to rip up the entire phone book or solve every painful issue in one session. A good time to "stop" is after an emotional epiphany or a particularly positive exchange. Or if you've been proceeding for 45 minutes and the child seems to be avoiding the deeper issues. You can get to them at another time. When you've sensed they've had enough or they tell you they're done ripping the paper, instruct the child to take a comfy seat somewhere in the room and "supervise" as you, the parents, begin to "pick up all the feelings." (Be careful not to say "time to pick up the garbage!") However, before you begin to pick up the "feelings" take a moment and breathe... Look at the scattered papers around the room and see them as your child's "emotional life." I usually make a statement such as, "Wow look at all these feelings!!! They sure can get messy. Are feelings messy sometimes? Thank you for letting me know. Now, I am going to give them all the love and care that they deserve."

As the child observes, the parent takes the pillowcase and begins to pick up each feeling, either in piles or single pieces and comment on them with great empathy as you do so... "I'm sorry too that you do not see your biological mother." "I'm sorry too that we do not look alike." "I'm sorry too that your biological mommy

could not be your everyday mommy.” “This feeling I am going to hold on to and give lots of love.”

It is strongly suggested that parents do what they feel is authentic in their hearts at this moment. I have witnessed parents kiss each paper and not say much at all, hug piles of feelings and convey to the child through facial expressions “how much this means to them”, and have witnessed many parents reduced to tears upon truly understanding the depth of their child’s grief. Or realizing, in these moments, that it is their responsibility to feel these emotions along with their child and not simply deny them. I’ve also seen many children’s faces light up and be amazed at their parents’ capacity to be so reflective, open and honest about the reality of their adoption and the realization that they are truly loved. This intervention is a bridge toward healing and attachment for many of the families I have worked with and continue to work with.

In the end, when all the “feelings” have been identified and placed in the pillowcase, ask the child, “Are there any feelings I have missed?” The child scans the room and points them out so all have been acknowledged. Then the parents write a closing response on the bag such as “I understand.” “I love all of your feelings.” “I am here to listen.” “I want to help hold on to your sadness, so you don’t have to hold on all by yourself.” The parent then reads the response out loud to the child and lets the child know, “We are going to hold on to these feelings until you tell me to let go of them. I will keep them close to our bed and keep them safe.” Parent is instructed to carry the “bag of feelings” around the house some times, this act conveys to the child their feelings can be secured and their parents can handle them and will not be overwhelmed by them.