



Checklist of Early Childhood Practices that Support Social Emotional Development and Trauma-Informed Care

A reflective guide for early interventionists

Implementing a trauma-informed approach is an ongoing process—not a program to be completed or monitored by a checklist. It reflects a meaningful shift in knowledge, perspective, attitudes, and skills that continues to grow over time.

In early intervention, trauma-informed care honors how early adversity and stress shape the lives of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers. It intentionally creates spaces of safety, trust, regulation, and healing within everyday routines and relationships—where change happens most naturally.

Early interventionists have unique opportunities to embed trauma-informed care into daily practice. Within daily moments shared with children and their caregivers, you create opportunities for connection, emotional safety, and healing. Small, intentional interactions can have a lasting impact.

Your role is vital. You notice signs of trauma, build trusting relationships, and help children feel safe, seen, and supported. Through predictable routines and nurturing relationships, you strengthen social-emotional skills that lay the foundation for resilience and lifelong well-being.

Understanding trauma shifts how behavior is interpreted—from judgment to curiosity, from reaction to reflection—allowing you to support not only development, but healing.

Purpose

This checklist is a reflective tool to support your trauma-informed practice as you nurture the social-emotional development of young children who have experienced trauma. It is not exhaustive and is not a substitute for clinical treatment or counseling.

Many of these practices align with the [Key Principles of the Pyramid Model](#) and, when used with intention, can make a powerful difference in the lives of children and their families.

How to Use the Checklist

Use this checklist as a moment of reflection and intention-setting—honoring what you already do well and identifying opportunities to grow.

Instructions

First, read all the items in the checklist below. Next review each section one at a time. Make a check in the first column if you feel engaged in the practice consistently. Make a check in the second column if you want to improve upon or enhance this practice. You will have an opportunity to create an [action plan](#) using this checklist.

Understanding and Explaining the Impact of Early Experiences

Focus: Early interventionists recognize that chronic stress, trauma, and caregiver mental health challenges influence brain development, stress responses, emotional regulation, behavior, relationships, attachment, and learning.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explore caregiver stressors with curiosity: Use open-ended and reflective questions to understand what caregivers are experiencing and how these stressors may be affecting family interactions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide simple, accessible anticipatory guidance: Share information about brain development, stress responses, emotional regulation, behavior, trauma, and attachment in ways that feel relatable and non-overwhelming.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Observe and reflect on relationships: Notice attachment patterns and responsive interactions, and reflect these observations back to caregivers to highlight strengths and emerging patterns in their relationship with their child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use neutral, respectful reframing: Avoid blame and help caregivers interpret behavior through a lens of safety, stress, and unmet needs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Highlight the role of co-regulation: Emphasize how a calm, responsive adult helps a child's nervous system return to safety and supports emotional development.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Gently explore caregivers' own early experiences: When appropriate, invite reflection using prompts such as "When you were little, what helped you feel safe?" or "What did you need when things felt hard?" to deepen insight and connection.

What assumptions or biases might I hold about families experiencing stress or trauma, and how could these shape my interactions?

Where do I feel confident—and where do I need more learning or support—when explaining the impact of early experiences?

Prioritizing Emotional and Physical Safety

Focus: Early interventionists promote calm interactions, consistent routines, clear expectations, and supportive transitions.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Organize supportive environments: Help families set up physical spaces that meet sensory and emotional needs (visuals, calming spaces or materials, fewer choices) and reduce overwhelm to support engagement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support predictable routines and transitions: Model and share transition supports—visuals, first-then boards, advance warnings, songs, and consistent routines—and collaborate on adaptations across settings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learn and adapt with families: Use open-ended questions to understand family routines and co-create consistent patterns that strengthen nurturing, responsive, serve-and-return interactions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Maintain a calm, regulated presence: Use a calm voice, regulated pacing, and supportive body language—especially during stress—and adjust expectations when the child or caregiver shows overwhelm; slow down and respond with curiosity rather than judgment.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Collaborate on positive guidance: Work with caregivers on redirection, meaningful choices, consistent responses across adults, and using fewer “don’t” statements.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explore caregiver perspectives: Invite reflection on their parenting role (e.g., “What kind of parent do you hope to be?”).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Frame behavior through safety and need: Help caregivers view behavior through a lens of safety and unmet needs; wonder aloud about the child’s internal experience (“I’m curious if he felt unsure in that moment”) and support the shift from “What’s wrong with them?” to “What happened to them or around them?”

How do I ensure the environments, routines, and transitions I support truly reduce overwhelm and promote calm for both the caregiver and child?

When stress rises, how effectively do I regulate my own presence and respond with curiosity rather than urgency or judgment?

Building Strong, Trusting Relationships

Focus: Early interventionists build warm, attuned interactions, respectful partnerships, and affirm family strengths and cultural practices.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Model warmth, calm, and attuned support: Use a soft tone, relaxed posture, attuned pacing, shared eye contact, and a regulated presence to foster safety and connection.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Engage in interactions that build trust and partnership: Listen more than you speak, actively reflect caregiver perspectives, and support joint problem-solving as caregivers share more openly over time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Acknowledge and affirm family strengths: Name strengths, validate experiences, and help caregivers feel accepted and understood through relational, nonjudgmental language.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Prioritize connection before strategies: Check in with caregivers, adapt plans based on their emotional state, and explain why strategies matter—not just what to do.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support reflective understanding and parent-child trust: Explore caregivers' emotional experiences with their child ("What feels easiest? What feels hardest?"), support them in reflecting on interactions ("How do you respond after a hard moment?"), and coach interactions that strengthen trust and connection.

How do I intentionally build connection with families in the first moments after entering the home?

A caregiver shares that they're feeling overwhelmed. How do you respond in a way that validates their experience and offers genuine support?

Supporting Regulation and Emotional Development

Focus: Early Interventionists help caregivers read and respond to their child's cues, co-regulate emotions before expecting self-regulation, and teach emotional language and calming strategies within daily routines.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explore family calming strategies: Ask caregivers how they comfort their child, what helps their child feel safe, and how emotions are expressed in their family and culture.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support noticing and responding to emotional cues: Help caregivers observe and interpret their child's cues (facial expressions, body language, vocal tone) and respond in timely, attuned ways that help the child feel "seen" and understood.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Celebrate efforts and strengthen connection: Encourage caregivers to recognize and affirm their child's efforts and successes, and use personal affirmations that help the child feel noticed and "known."
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Wonder together about internal experience: Collaborate with caregivers to reflect on what the child might be thinking or feeling ("I wonder what he's thinking right now") and explore strategies used before escalation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teach emotional language: Support caregivers in teaching a rich emotional vocabulary using visuals, books, feeling faces, and everyday moments, and encourage caregivers to label their own emotions with simple action statements.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Model and coach co-regulation: Demonstrate how to soothe and support a child during stress, emphasizing that caregiver regulation precedes child regulation. Affirm caregiver efforts to co-regulate and reflect emotional safety.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Practice calming strategies in routines: Coach caregivers in using calming techniques—deep breathing, sensory tools, quiet breaks, mindfulness, and playful regulation activities—within daily routines and during calm moments.

How well do I support caregivers in noticing and responding to their child's emotional cues?

How do I model co-regulation and emotional language in everyday moments?

Using Predictable, Responsive Environments and Routines

Focus: Early interventionists collaborate with families to create simple, consistent routines, use positive guidance and clear expectations, and adapt environments to reduce overwhelm and support success.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Establish simple, predictable routines: Partner with caregivers to create clear, consistent routines at home and in community settings, using visuals, schedules, and “do” statements to increase predictability.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use positive guidance and clear expectations: Support families in using positively stated expectations (“gentle touches”), explore how they redirect behavior, and collaborate on strategies that promote consistency across settings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Follow the child’s lead and coach responsiveness: Model responsive strategies during play and help caregivers tune into their child’s cues, pacing, and interests.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adapt environments to reduce overwhelm: Help families reduce sensory load by simplifying spaces (less activity choices, calming areas, fewer demands) and adjusting expectations to support regulation and engagement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support smooth transitions and reduce power struggles: Use transition supports—warnings, songs, visuals, choices—and narrate your own regulation (“I’m going to slow us down”) to model calm, predictable pacing.

How do I stay attuned to the child’s cues and interests, and use those moments to guide caregivers in creating responsive, flexible routines that support connection and success?

What strategies do I use to help families adapt their environments in ways that reduce overwhelm and support engagement?

Understanding Behavior with Curiosity and Compassion

Focus: Early interventionists partner with caregivers to understand behavior without blame, examine developmental and environmental factors, and support skill-building while adjusting adult responses.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	View behavior through a lens of safety and communication: Support caregivers in seeing behavior as communication rather than misbehavior, using curiosity-based language (“I wonder if...”; “It might be hard when...”).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use positive, proactive guidance: Help caregivers reframe guidance toward desired behaviors (“Use walking feet” instead of “Don’t run”), offer meaningful choices to promote autonomy reduce power struggles, and use consistent, positively stated expectations across adults.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explore triggers and patterns without blame: Collaborate with caregivers to identify developmental, sensory, environmental, and routine-based factors that may influence behavior. Invite reflection on patterns across time (“When do things go more smoothly?”) to identify patterns.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Develop compassionate hypotheses together: Partner with families to consider whether the child may feel unsafe, overwhelmed, or in a fight/flight/freeze/control response, and explore the meaning or function of the behavior with a neutral, reflective tone.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teach replacement skills and adjust adult responses: Work with caregivers to build plans that include teaching new skills, preventing challenging behavior, and adjusting adult responses to increase safety, regulation, and connection.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support reflective shifts in interpretation: Help caregivers reframe how they interpret behavior (“He needs help” vs. “He’s being bad”) and encourage them to ask their own reflective questions as insight grows.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use observation as a teaching tool: Narrate what you see in real time (“When you softened your voice, she relaxed right away”) and connect observations to brain–behavior patterns in a strengths-based way.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider the whole child: Explore how development, temperament, sensory load, stress, trauma, adversity, and changes in routine shape behavior and the child’s ability to cope.

How consistently do I approach behavior with curiosity rather than judgment or urgency?

How do I support caregivers in seeing behavior through a lens of safety, stress, and unmet needs?

Honoring Caregiver Well-Being and Resilience

Focus: Early interventionists recognize that caregivers may also have experienced trauma, validate caregiver stress and effort, avoid overwhelming families with strategies, and focus on small, achievable changes.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support caregiver mental health with sensitivity: Acknowledge when caregivers are experiencing mental health challenges while centering dignity, choice, cultural context, and access to supportive resources.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Normalize stress and reduce shame: Validate caregivers' emotional experiences, reflect back feelings ("It makes sense you felt overwhelmed"), and reinforce that their reactions are understandable given the stress they're carrying.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pace information to prevent overwhelm: Check in before sharing more ("Would it be helpful to hear a little more about that?") and offer small, digestible pieces rather than large explanations or long lists of strategies.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Affirm caregiver effort and resilience: Highlight strengths, persistence, and care—even in hard moments—to help caregivers feel seen, supported, and capable.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Focus on small, achievable steps: Collaborate on simple, manageable changes that honor the caregiver's capacity and reduce pressure during stressful times.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explore the caregiver's support system and calming strategies: Ask who they lean on, what helps them feel grounded, and what routines or practices help them reset during stressful moments; offer resources when appropriate.

How do I ensure caregivers feel validated, supported, and not overwhelmed by information or strategies?

How do I respond in a supportive, attuned way when I notice a caregiver showing low affect or low energy?

Caregiver and Child Empowerment

Focus: Early interventionists strengthen caregiver confidence, highlight family strengths, and support caregivers in using strategies that feel meaningful, culturally aligned, and doable within daily life.

Consistently	Focus Area	Practice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Affirm caregiver strengths and expertise: Offer specific, authentic praise linked to observable actions; help caregivers feel noticed, valued, and seen as the experts on their child.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Support caregivers in celebrating their child: Coach caregivers to offer specific praise for their child's efforts and successes, reinforcing connection, confidence, and positive behavior.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Promote caregiver choice and agency: Ask what has worked for them before offering suggestions, adapt strategies to fit their routines and cultural values, and invite caregivers to choose what feels doable.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Explain the “why” behind strategies: Provide simple, meaningful rationales so caregivers feel confident trying strategies during the visit—without pressure—and understand how their actions support their child's development.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Highlight family strengths and resilience patterns: Name protective factors such as warmth, persistence, creativity, and advocacy, and help caregivers see how these strengths directly support their child's growth.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reinforce growing confidence: Notice and reflect when caregivers express relief or increased confidence (“This feels more doable”), and celebrate these moments as signs of empowerment and progress.

How do I strengthen caregiver confidence and highlight their expertise?

How do I intentionally support a child's confidence through the way I model, coach, and respond during everyday interactions?

Reflective Practice and Professional Use of Self

Focus: Early interventionists engage in ongoing self-reflection, regulate their own responses, seek support when needed, and recognize that trauma-informed practice is a continual learning process.

Consistently

Focus Area

Practice

Reflect on personal reactions and assumptions: Notice your own stress, emotional responses, and internal narratives; use self-reflection statements and remain open to feedback.

Slow down and regulate during moments of overwhelm: Adjust pacing, tone, and expectations when families or children show signs of stress or dysregulation.

Seek support for complex situations: Name limits, consult with supervisors or colleagues, and collaboratively plan next steps when challenges exceed your capacity or scope.

Recognize trauma-informed care as ongoing practice: Approach the work with humility, curiosity, and a commitment to continual learning rather than a checklist mindset.

How aware am I of my own reactions, assumptions, and emotional state during visits?

What support, learning, or reflection would help me show up more grounded and effective?