Behavior Strategies:
What Are Your Tools?

This handout will discuss three types of tools:
• Praise and reinforcement

• Problem-solving

• Limit setting

For each, a brief discussion is provided of ways in which a child or teen's experience with trauma should inform your use of the tool.

Praise and reinforcement

Why? ▪ To build children and teens' awareness of their successes and positive capacities

▪ To shift the adult frame from negative (focused on bad behavior) to positive (focused on strengths and successes)

When? ▪   Any time a child or teen is engaging in a behavior you want to increase (including ending a negative behavior)

How? ▪   Provide verbally (with words), nonverbally (showing pride and appreciation) and/or concretely (using reinforcement charts or tangible rewards)

▪ Be specific. Label the behavior: o "I'm so proud of you for trying to use your tools and calm down."
o "You just did such a good job listening when I asked you to clean up."

Trauma considerations. Be aware that praise can trigger traumatized children and teens.
▪ If kids reject your praise or ignore it, try not to take it personally, and don't engage in a power struggle. It's OK for a child or teen to disagree with or not respond to your statements.

▪ With children who seem triggered by praise, it may be helpful to focus on the positive behavior rather than the whole child and to be selective (don't praise everything). Say things like: *"You worked so hard on that drawing"* rather than *"What a good artist you are."*

▪ Keep noticing positive things. Even for a child or teen who seems distressed or unresponsive, over time the positives will matter.

Problem-solving

Why? ▪   To help children and teens build awareness of having and making choices, and the ability to get in front of challenges, instead of just reacting to them.

▪   To help children and teens feel more in control of and powerful over their lives.

When? ▪   In calm states, in anticipation of or following distress, challenges or other problem situations.

▪   When the child or teen is asking you for help.

▪   Regularly, through building skill by practicing and addressing the many small challenges that arise daily.

How? ▪   Communicate your willingness to support the child or teen and your belief in a solution (Let's figure this out.).

▪   Help the child or teen identify what the problem is (What is it that you're trying to solve?).

▪   Identify goals or outcomes (What do we want to have happen?).

▪   Identify choices (What kinds of things might we be able to do?).

▪   Identify consequences (what might happen if we do that?).

▪   Make a plan and troubleshoot it. Be sure to pay attention to the adult support role.

Trauma considerations. Is it possible to use problem-solving strategies in any situation? The ability to engage in problem solving depends on: ▪   *Agency*: the child or teen's belief in his or her ability to make choices or be successful.

▪   *State*: which part of the brain is online.

▪   *Stage*: developmental capacity. Children or teens' ability to use problem solving as they develop.

Another factor to consider: The adult's calm approach, appropriate timing and ongoing support is crucial to using problem-solving approaches with children and teens. Very few can problem solve on their own in a challenging situation.

Limit-setting

Why? ▪ To establish an understanding of boundaries, expectations and understanding of what happens in a safe world

▪ To help children contain and shift negative behaviors and identify positive alternatives

▪ To help children and teens learn about inappropriate behaviors

When? ▪ When behaviors cross established boundaries for safety, harm to others or harm to self

▪ Thoughtfully—and not for every behavior

How? ▪ In a calm adult state, whenever possible

▪ Thoughtfully: Work to identify appropriate limits in advance of behaviors occurring

▪ Make limits age-appropriate

▪ If naming consequences, do so when child or teen is reasonably calm, after regulation tools have been used

▪ Less is more. Be concise and clear in naming consequences. Link them to the behavior, not the child or teen.

▪ Move on. Allow space for the child or teen's distressed affect (it's OK for a child or teen to be angry about a consequence), but also create space for repair. Try to let go of your own anger and use your tools.

Trauma Considerations

Any limit can be a potential trigger for a traumatized child or teen. When setting a limit:

• Be thoughtful about the child or teen's particular history when choosing and naming consequences. For instance, time-out may escalate distress for a child or teen with a neglect history. Yelling is likely to trigger a child or teen who has experienced violence.

• Bring attunement into your choice of limits. Remember to validate and name the child or teen's affect, even when you give a consequence for behavior ("I understand how angry you were, but we use our words, not our hands when we are mad").

• Separate the behavior from the child or teen.

Approaches to Behavior

Pick one behavior a child or teen in your home is displaying that you find challenging or that you want to increase. Use this worksheet to try to identify a child or teen's patterns and needs and develop a plan.

1. What behavior do you want to address?
Behavior: _____
Do you want this behavior to… Increase Decrease

2. Identify patterns. What do you think leads to this behavior? What are some of the triggers (situational, environmental, internal)?
What do you think the child or teen is trying to do? What is the function or need that the behavior is addressing?

3. **Go-to strategies to address this behavior:**
How else might you be able to meet the needs identified in question 2? Be specific: when, how, who?

What regulation/de-escalation/crisis management strategies can you support in the moment if the child is dysregulated?

4. Additional behavior response strategies. Which of these do you think might work?
• **Praise and reinforcement.** Use to increase a behavior or a desired alternative behavior.

• **Problem-solving.** Use when child or teen is in regulated state, to support control/choice and identify alternatives.

• **Appropriate limits.** Use to contain and address negative or dangerous behaviors.

5. After the behavior occurs, how might you and the child or teen continue to learn from it? Consider timing, method and approach to revisiting behaviors, with a goal of shifting the behavior the next time. What can you plan to do? Be specific:
With my child or teen, I can (When? How?):

By myself or with my caregiving partner, I can (When? How?):