



## Bridging Education & Mental Health

# Tip Sheets

## Bridging Education and Mental Health: Inviting and Containing Techniques

### Inviting Techniques Elicit Expression

#### What is an Inviting Technique?

Inviting techniques invite children to express themselves and their emotions through symbolic play, drawing, painting, playdoh, books, etc. In these activities therapeutic language (see Therapeutic Language Tip Sheet at <http://education.umn.edu/ceed/publications/tipsheets/default.html#rbt>) and therapeutic techniques are combined with regular curricular activities to create a situation that invites self-expression around a stressful event or particularly difficult issues, such as separation, fear of strangers, moving, a divorce, etc.

#### How Should an Inviting Technique Be Used?

Relationship-based, emotionally responsive classrooms provide a variety of opportunities for self-expression. Teachers should regularly and purposefully organize activities to invite children to express their feelings. During these activities, teachers should be prepared to actively listen and validate the children's feelings as they communicate their thoughts. However, teachers should also recognize that children express themselves at unpredictable times and should be prepared to use inviting techniques to support children's feelings as they arise while engaged in play activities throughout the day. Activities such as drawing, painting, playdoh, and symbolic play all invite self-expression and are used in combination with reflective listening to support children's emotional development.

**Drawing Example:** Several children in the class have experienced sudden moves related to eviction, foster placement, and fleeing domestic violence. The unexpected moves involve many losses for the children and the teacher wanted to provide an appropriate way for the children to express their feelings about this particularly stressful time in their lives. The teacher cut out big trucks for the children and said, "If you were moving and you had a great big truck, what would you put in your truck to bring with you? You can put anything you want in your truck." The children begin drawing. One child, who just moved to a foster home, draws the puppy he left behind and tells the teacher about his puppy. Another child hands the teacher the crayon, requesting help with his drawing, saying, "My mom! Put my mom in the truck!" This child has just recently experienced three sudden moves related to his mother going to jail and he wishes he could bring his mother when he moves. The teacher then replies, "It sounds like you will miss your Mom."

**Symbolic Play Example:** Using the scenario from above, a teacher could also extend the activity by using symbolic play as an inviting technique. Many play trucks or small suitcases in the housekeeping area could be provided. Working on the same theme, the teacher could provide items or have the children pretend they are packing to leave and ask them what they would bring along on their move.

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# Containing Techniques

## What is a Containing Technique?

Emotionally overwhelmed children need a preschool that is physically and emotionally safe, with a classroom structure and a relationship with the teacher that is strong enough to survive their emotional upheaval. The elements of this structure include a predictable classroom routine and schedule, a well organized environment where everything has a place, and a physical layout of the classroom that has a balance of loud and quiet spaces with a specific “safe place” like a cozy corner where children can go to calm down and decrease stimulation. The teacher can create a containing relationship with a child by reinforcing the idea that she will be the child’s teacher “even if she is angry” and her relationship with the child is not contingent on “good” behavior. Containing techniques assure the child that the environment is strong enough to survive their emotional outbursts and that their essential relationships will not change as a result of their behavior.

## Routine

Basic routines are important for all young children because they allow children to predict what is coming. A stable daily routine is particularly important for traumatized children because life has probably been very unpredictable for them and they will need to learn how to trust those around them. These children also need to know that the school routine is strong enough to withstand their emotional outbursts;; therefore, even if a child is disruptive, routines should continue as scheduled. It is important to directly teach routines to children by using picture schedules that are reviewed with them every day and that are used throughout the day during transitions.

## One Containing Technique- *Building a Fort*

*Building a Fort* is a containing strategy that involves helping a child build a fort in the classroom out of sheets and around furniture. The intent of this intervention is to allow the child to have a safe place that is all their own and they can decide who can come in and who cannot. Giving children the ability to control an area of their room is important when they feel they have no power or control over other troubling aspects of their lives.

## Classroom Example:

A stressed child is climbing, throwing toys, and swearing.

Teacher: “Marcia, you are having such big feelings today! Would you like to build a strong, strong fort and you can be the boss of the fort, and no one can come inside unless you say so?”

Marcia: “I want a fort! And nobody can come in.”

Teacher: “Nobody can come in unless you say so. They have to ask.”

Marcia: “They have to ask!”

The teacher gets masking tape and doll blankets and makes a “fort” under the table. Marcia is delighted with her fort and sits under the table with her favorite toys. Other children ask if they can go in the fort. The teacher explains it is Marcia’s fort and they have to ask Marcia. Children ask if they can come in her fort. Some children are told yes and some no. The teacher allows Marcia to choose who can play in the fort today. The fort provides the containing that Marcia needs.

## Another Containing Technique- *Staying with the Child*

While a child is having an emotional outburst, it is important to never threaten that you will spend less time with the child because of his/her behavior. For example, a teacher should not threaten to send the child home or say that she cannot be the child’s friend when they act this way. The child may perceive that the teacher is not strong enough to withstand his difficult behavior and the behavior may escalate to test the teacher’s commitment. Teachers instead can say things like, “I know you’re angry with me right now but I won’t let you hurt me or yourself. I will still be your teacher even when you’re angry.” During an emotional outburst, although it is important to stay with a child, it is also important to limit the interaction as too much language at that point could further agitate the child.

## Summary

Inviting and containing techniques can be used as strategies with the whole classroom to both invite emotional expression or to offer a safe environment that will contain a child’s overwhelming emotions. These techniques can also be used as an intervention for specific children who are in need of focused emotional support.

References: Koplw, L.(1996) *Unsmiling Faces: How Preschools can heal*. New York: Columbia University.

For additional information on this topic, please visit CEED’s web site at <http://education.umn.edu/ceed>.

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