

## **Trigger Stop: Sensory and Emotional Check-In Application**

### **A Companion Guide**



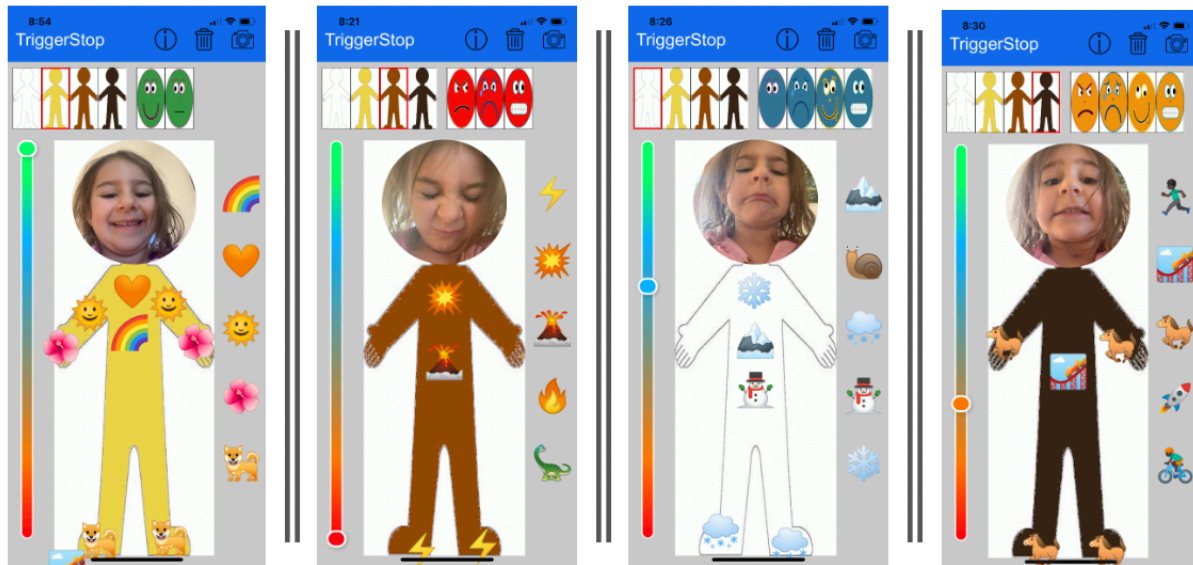
### **Helpful Tips to Use this Application to Promote Sensory and Emotional Literacy**

Welcome to the Application (APP) called **Trigger Stop: Sensory and Emotional Check-In** for young children ages 3-8. It is best to proactively teach children when they are calm and curious about how this application can assist them in identifying, expressing and communicating their physical/sensory and emotional states. Attempting to introduce it when they are triggered, agitated or dysregulated will not be successful.

Exploring, discussing and explaining the application's sensory images and feeling faces is an important first step in helping the child practice how to identify and communicate the physical sensations that are tied to their emotional states. This application is intended to be used with an adult and child together, NOT the child alone. In other words, the APP is not intended to be used by a child without a caring, supportive adult to assist them in accessing and expressing the feelings and emotions they are experiencing. The objective is for children to be able to identify and express nonverbally or with their own words what they are sensing and/or feeling. The adult is supporting the child by first teaching body awareness and helping them tune inwards to their sensations and emotions. After the child has gained these skills, the adult can help the child effectively communicate when they are triggered emotionally, and outside their zone of optimal regulation.

This APP is not intended to provide treatment for children. If there is an emergency or ongoing persistent challenge, referrals for therapy or other evidence-based treatments is recommended.

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Created by Julie Kurtz  
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**Note:** A child can practice by taking a photo with the APP of their own face showing an emotion or use a designated face for each zone (red, orange, blue or green).

### HOW TO USE THIS APP:

1. Before emotional literacy comes sensory awareness. **Building Sensory and Body Awareness** is essential to children developing insight around what is happening in their body when they are in optimal states of regulation, hypo-aroused (frozen) or hyper-aroused (fight or flight). We all experience feelings (i.e. happy, sad, angry, lonely, frustrated), but we also experience sensations within our body (i.e. flowers, twisted up, shaky, jumpy, empty, frozen, tight, butterflies in my stomach). Sensations and feelings are clues, and we can teach a child to be aware of both in

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order to understand if they are in a triggered state, and if so, how to bring their mind and body back to the optimal state of arousal/regulation.

2. When a child has an emotional button pushed ('triggered'), they may move from an optimal state of regulation (calm) to dysregulated or hyper-aroused (anxious, fight, unfocused, running away) or hypo-aroused (shut down, dissociative, disconnected, numb, frozen, unresponsive).
3. When a child is triggered emotionally and they become dysregulated, they may not be able to express themselves with words. Another way to help children express themselves without words is to point to objects that represent what they feel or the sensations they experience inside their body.
4. The best way to teach is when a child is calm. That way their executive or thinking brain can really be engaged in the lesson. When dysregulated it is difficult to access your thinking brain because of the intense emotions. So, teaching and practicing with a child when they are calm on how to use the APP to identify sensations and feelings, what each visual object means and how it might be tied to an emotion or sensation, is recommended.
5. Walk the child through the thermometer. Point out when they are in each part of the thermometer (**red**, **orange**, **blue** and **green**) there are feeling faces at the top of the screen that they can drag to the face of the silhouette body image and there are images representing sensations they can drag to where they may be feeling them in their body. They can communicate non-verbally or verbally to express to the adult what is happening in their body. Another way to practice is to read stories to the child. Ask the child to use the APP to visually express what the characters in the book are feeling and guess as to the sensations that might be occurring in their body. Then you can begin to explore with the child about if they have ever experienced those same sensations and emotions. Practice makes for Progress!
6. The thermometer gauge has four areas:
  - a. **Green** – Represents a state such as calm, happy, easygoing, flexible, safe (**optimal regulation**). This is when the brain is calm and not in a survival mode of FIGHT, FLIGHT or FREEZE.
  - b. **Red** – Represents a state such as anger, anxiety or frustration, fear, scared, hurt (**hyper-arousal**). This is when a child is in the “**FIGHT**” part of their survival brain when emotionally triggered. They can often be hurting others, themselves or property in this fight zone.

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- c. **Orange** – Represents a state such as scared, frightened, terrified (**hyper-arousal**). This is when the brain is in a survival mode of **FLIGHT** or a need to run or escape from a situation. They can often be running away, hiding or trying to escape a situation.
  - d. **Blue** – Represents a state such as numb, empty, disconnected, worried, unresponsive, frozen (**hypo-arousal**). This is when the brain is in a survival mode of **FREEZE** and the child is unable to think, respond or even move. They can feel nothing, be stuck, hiding or maybe even immobile.
7. Children can be supported by a caring, nurturing and responsive adult to slowly express their current state by moving the thermometer to the zone they are in, dragging sensory objects to communicate the physiological/sensory response they are having in their body and can either take a photo of their own face or drag an emoji 'feeling face' to the head of the body. Taking photos of their own face is recommended only during practice time, not when the child is triggered unless the child chooses to do that on their own. An adult should never snap a photo of a dysregulated child and show them "this is what you look like".
8. Allowing a child to be heard, express themselves both nonverbally and verbally can help them establish a sense of calm and regulate their intense emotions. An adult that tunes in to a child's sensory and emotional state will support them in becoming calm again. Once calm, they can begin to access potential solutions, perspective taking, and thinking through problem solving steps. This entire process will help them learn and understand the unique inner workings of their own sensations and emotions.

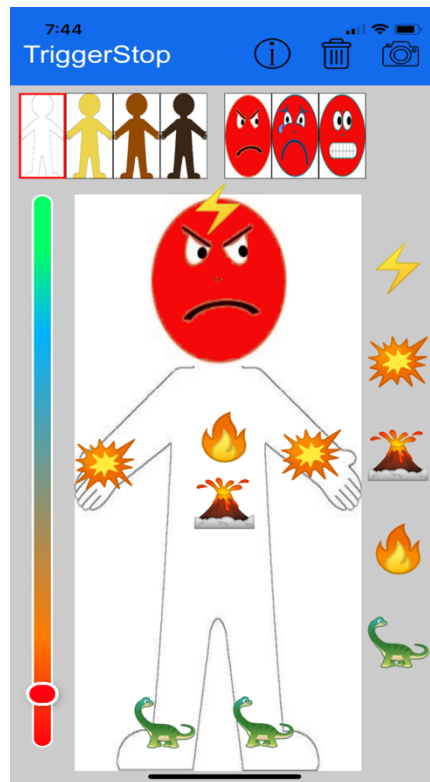
## APPLICATION EXAMPLES

The thermometer gauge on the left side of the APP screen has four areas with associated emoji images to the right that help a child identify SENSATIONS in the body:

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**Red-** Represents emotions such as anger, anxiety or frustration (**hyper-arousal**). This is when a child protects themselves from perceived danger by going in the "**FIGHT**" mode. In this state, the survival brain sends messages for them to fight in order to protect themselves from a perceived danger.



**Example:** Monica often throws temper tantrums when she does not get her way. While she was calm, her mom sat down with Monica to explore the application. She made up examples of what children can feel when they don't get their way. For example, a little girl was at Target and asked her mom for a candy bar while they were waiting in the check-out line, and her mom said "no". How do you think the little girl felt, what sensations were in her body and how does she look when in the red zone? They played together with this scenario and practiced learning about sensations and feelings.

**Green-** Represents emotions such as calm, happy, regulated (**optimal state of regulation**). This is when the brain is calm, not in a survival mode and a child can learn, engage and focus.

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**Example:** Jorge was showing his teacher a picture he drew. She said, “thank you for sharing this with me, it is a wonderful picture.” He smiled. She took him over to the APP and asked him to show her which zone he was in. He said, “Green” and moved the thermometer to the green zone. He then selected the happy face and the images that showed how he felt. The teacher validated what he was expressing, “you look happy and proud, and I see you have rainbows in your heart and a sun in your mind because you are calm and thinking so clearly.”

**Orange-** Represents emotions such as scared, frightened, terrified (**hyper-arousal**). This is when the brain is in a survival mode of **FLIGHT** or the need to escape a situation of perceived danger.

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**Example:** Amira was reading a book with her Grandma. They came across a character called, Racecar Robbie. When Robbie feels scared in the book, he tends to run away and escape. When he is asked to help his family by completing a chore he drives away as fast as he can from the house to hide. Grandma asked Amira to use the thermometer in the APP and put it in the orange zone which represents wanting to FLIGHT. The child help drag an image of the roller coaster in the heart, a rocket in the mind and a boy running and riding in his feet. They laughed as they talked about Robbie trying to run from his chores. Grandma asked, “is there ever a time you felt like running away too?”

**Blue-** Represents emotions such as numb, empty, disconnected, worried, frozen, or shut down (**hypo-arousal**). This is when the brain is in a survival mode of **FREEZE** (feels nothing and is unable to engage/respond or be comforted).



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**Example:** Dad was reading the book *Go Away, Big Green Monster* to his son Michael. Michael was often up at night and coming in to his dad's room saying he was scared. They used the APP to help Michael understand how his fears can make him feel frozen inside and unable to move or talk. They moved the temperature grid to BLUE and the face to frozen with a cloud with ice chips coming out of it. They put an iceberg in his heart and snails in his feet to show how he can often feel frozen and unable to move.



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Children can be supported by nurturing and responsive adult caregivers over time to identify and express how they feel by dragging a feeling face to the silhouetted body. They can also be taught to help express what state they are in by using the thermometer to move across the color zones - **green (calm)**, **orange (flight)**, **blue (freeze)** or **red (fight)**. Finally, they can use the visual images to the right of the body on the screen, which can represent any physiological sensations they may be experiencing inside their body.

Helping a child identify their sensations and feelings so that they may be heard and express themselves verbally or nonverbally will help them calm and regulate their intense emotions. There are four steps children need to learn in order to develop optimal brain and body regulation. You can teach these four steps using the APP:

- (1) Identify sensations and emotions in their body,
- (2) Identify how small, medium or large those sensations and emotions are,
- (3) If their emotions are medium or large, identify several self-regulation or calming strategies to quiet their brain and body so that they can do the fourth step,
- (4) Think, think, think through a solution to solve their problem!

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## **Visual Supports and Additional Learning Concepts**



### **Sensory and Emotional Literacy**

- 1. The ability to identify sensations and emotion words.**
- 2. The ability to identify sensations and emotions in myself.**
- 3. The ability to identify when sensations and emotions are small (green), medium (orange) or large (red) inside myself.**

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## **When is the Best Time to Teach Sensory or Emotional Awareness?**





# Difference Between Sensations and Feelings

*The body has to release a charge of energy after a trigger event*

## Sensations

- Physiological happenings in the body
- An energy charge in the body from a trigger
- The way your body “feels”  
(e.g. butterflies in stomach, head hurts, fire in throat, sweaty palms, pit in stomach)
- Body communicating intensity of experience

## Feelings

- Words describe how you feel
- Small, medium or large feelings or scale of 1-10
- Triggered by an experience
- Mad, Sad, Angry, Frustrated, Scared



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## Why Promote Sensory Awareness?

- Helps children find ways to **communicate without words** how they feel and what they are experiencing
- Trauma memories are **stored the reptile brain with sensations, not words**
- **When triggered, a child cannot access words** so communicating in other ways is the first point of entry for regulation



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<b>Sensory Language</b> <i>Experienced physiologically in the body</i>	<b>Feeling Language</b> <i>Feelings associated with that sensation</i>
<p><i>A volcano erupting</i></p> <p>Butterflies in my chest</p> <p>Bumble bees buzzing in my stomach</p> <p>A hammer in my head</p> <p>Jumpy like a frog</p> <p>Turtle</p> <p>Prickly</p> <p>Sweaty</p> <p>Frozen Iceberg</p>	<p><i>Angry</i></p> <p>Nervous</p> <p>Anxious</p> <p>Overwhelmed</p> <p>Worried</p> <p>Scared</p> <p>Fearful</p> <p>Stressed</p> <p>Numb, panicked, frightened</p>

Nicholson, Perez and Kurtz: *Trauma Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators: Relationship-Based Approaches that Support Healing and Build Resilience in Young Children*

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## Teaching Children to Describe the Sensations in Their Bodies

My heart feels **Jumpy like a Frog**  
My head feels **Frozen** and my body feels **Cold** My heart is beating **Fast like a Race Car**  
My tummy feels like a **Roller Coaster** My head feels like **Buzzing Bees**  
My insides are **Twisty**  
My legs feel like heavy **Rocks**  
My insides are **Empty**  
I feel **Cold** all over  
My heart is **Heavy**  
I feel like a **Volcano** ready to explode  
My brain feels like a **Rocket Ship** ready to take off My fists are **Tight**  
My face feels **Hot** and **Sweaty**  
My whole body feels **Loose**  
I have **Scratchy** skin  
My legs and arms are **Shaky**  
My body feels like an **Iceberg**  
My tummy is a **T-rex Dinosaur** My mouth is like a **Cotton Ball**  
My head feels like a **Roller Coaster**

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<b>Trigger</b>	<b>Sensation</b>	<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Thought</b>
<b>Stranger Enters Class</b>	<b>Butterflies in Stomach</b>	<b>Fear</b>	<b>They Might Hurt Me?</b>
<b>Nap Time</b>	<b>Body Feels Like Ice Cubes/ Frozen</b>  <b>We only see the triggered or challenging behavior!</b>	<b>Scared Terror Frightened</b>	<b>I am not safe Adults may hurt me if I sleep</b>

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**For the Video Companion Guide Visit: [www.optimalbrainintegration.com](http://www.optimalbrainintegration.com)**