



Exploring new frontiers in trauma recovery: The Safe and Sound Protocol

By Sejla Murdoch

Children and adolescents from refugee-like backgrounds face unique and complex challenges as they navigate the aftermath of trauma. Many struggle with emotional dysregulation, attentional difficulties, and neurodevelopmental challenges—all compounded by displacement and loss. For clinicians, addressing these layered needs requires innovation, sensitivity, and a multidisciplinary approach.

At the forefront of this work is STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors), a specialised non-profit organisation with over 30 years of experience supporting individuals impacted by torture and trauma. STARTTS has consistently sought holistic and culturally relevant interventions for its clients, many of whom are children exposed to war, violence, and displacement.

One promising tool in STARTTS' repertoire is the Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP), a therapeutic intervention grounded in neuroscience and the Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges. SSP uses specially filtered music to stimulate the nervous system, fostering emotional regulation, social engagement, and resilience. Since 2018, STARTTS has integrated SSP into its clinical practice, evaluating its efficacy in addressing trauma-related issues in children, including attentional deficits and emotional dysregulation.

Promising Outcomes

A pre-post evaluation conducted at STARTTS's Neurofeedback Program in 2018 involved children listening to SSP's specially filtered music over five consecutive days, with each session lasting an hour. Assessment using the Test of Variables of Attention (TOVA)—a reliable tool for measuring attention and impulse control—revealed statistically significant improvements. Both visual and auditory TOVA tests demonstrated enhanced response consistency,

processing speed, and impulse control among participating children.

Additionally, feedback from counsellors and families highlighted notable improvements in emotional regulation and sleep quality. These outcomes underscore SSP's potential to regulate the autonomic nervous system and promote a sense of safety and calm, critical for trauma recovery.

A New Research Initiative

Building on these encouraging results, in 2025 STARTTS is embarking on a new research project aimed at further evaluating SSP's effectiveness in children and adolescents who are trauma survivors. This ambitious study will expand the scope of investigation, exploring the protocol's impact on a larger sample of clients, including those with significant neurodevelopmental challenges.

By combining SSP with trauma counselling, STARTTS seeks to provide a nuanced, holistic approach to healing. This integration could lead to enhanced emotional regulation and improved social engagement in children, offering them a pathway to rebuild their lives and futures.

As the global refugee crisis continues, with an estimated 41 per cent of displaced individuals under the age of 18, initiatives like this are critical. Refugee children face profound challenges in rebuilding their lives, and innovative interventions like SSP can play a pivotal role in supporting their recovery and integration into new societies.

STARTTS' commitment to expanding its trauma recovery toolkit through research and innovation underscores its dedication to providing meaningful, evidence-based support to survivors. By addressing the intricate interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors, STARTTS is paving the way for a more resilient and hopeful future for refugee children. ▮