

Trauma-Informed Parenting: Your Complete Guide

Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange



SUMMARY:

1

All children in foster care have experienced some form of trauma: Being in foster care itself is traumatic due to separation from birth families, often caused by neglect or abuse.

2

Understanding trauma is crucial: Different types of trauma (abuse, neglect, loss) impact children differently, affecting emotional, cognitive, and social development.

3

Effects of trauma on a child's brain: Trauma can impact sensory development, attachment, emotional and behavioral regulation, cognition, and self-concept, leading to various mental health issues.

4

Healing from trauma is possible: The parent-child connection is crucial for healing, as relationships play a key role in repairing the neurological impacts of trauma.

5

Trauma-informed parenting: Involves creating a safe environment, building trusting relationships, coaching emotional regulation, responding empathetically to behavioral challenges, and prioritizing parental self-care in a lifelong journey of healing and understanding trauma

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Trauma-Informed Parenting

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE

All children in foster care have experienced some form of trauma. The very act of being put in foster care is traumatic for children because it means removal from their birth family. Often, the very reason children were removed from their homes is because they experienced neglect or abuse.

Parenting children who have experienced trauma is a profound journey that demands a unique set of skills and understanding. We've put together this in-depth guide to help you as an adoptive or foster parent gain an understanding of trauma-informed care so that your family can be equipped to thrive. In this guide, we'll draw on the wisdom of experts in the field, delving deep into understanding trauma, how it affects children, and how you can practice trauma-informed care.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

"Understanding the diverse forms of trauma is crucial. Abuse, neglect, and loss impact a child's development differently. Tailoring support to these specific experiences is essential for effective parenting." - Dr. Karyn Purvis

Child traumatic stress occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope. These dire experiences create neurological changes that cause the child to be continually in "survival" mode. Since children are still developing, the impacts of trauma in their early life can go on to shape their behavior and experiences in a number of ways.

There are many distinct types of trauma, each with specific impacts on a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development. Abuse, neglect, loss, abandonment, or other experiences can all have traumatic effects. Common stories of traumatic experiences could be:

- A baby or child relinquished by birth parents
- A baby or child removed or relinquished from birth parents because they have been physically/sexually/emotionally abused
- A baby or child who has been neglected
- A child who lives between harmful birth parents and safe friends/family over a long period of time
- A child removed at birth and who goes on to experience multiple adverse experiences, such as death of a care-giver, bullying, or physical illness
- A child living with a safe and loving family, but who suffers sexual abuse from outside the family from a young age
- A baby or child removed from safe foster carers placed into a safe adoptive family
- A child who experienced severe health problems and multiple medical interventions period of time

(List from Dr Shoshanah Lyons, Dr Kathryn Whyte, Ruth Stephens and Helen Townsend www.beaconhouse.org.uk/useful-resources/)

It's important to note that individuals may experience multiple types of trauma, and the effects can be cumulative. Moreover, the age at which the trauma occurs, the duration, and the relationship with the perpetrator can also influence the severity and manifestation of trauma-related symptoms.

Children who have such traumatic experiences are often stuck in survival responses - fight/flight/freeze/collapse - carrying their past experiences with them wherever they go. As a result, they tend to develop many coping mechanisms that manifest as difficult behavior and are hindered in appropriate development of impulse control, problem-solving, or rationalizing.

Even though trauma can drastically affect a child's life, the burden of trauma can often be invisible in day-to-day life. It is the caregiver's responsibility to become attuned to the hidden emotional burdens they carry so that you can provide the nuanced support they need to thrive.

"Children from hard places carry invisible emotional burdens. Being attuned to these hidden struggles allows parents to provide the nuanced support their children need." - Deborah Gray

TRAUMA'S EFFECTS ON A CHILD'S BRAIN

Every experience of trauma is unique, and the nature of what a child has experienced will shape how it affects them. The stage of their development, the severity of circumstances, and the child's unique makeup all contribute to the neurological effects on the child's brain - and how those effects manifest in everyday life.

Trauma can affect every layer of a child's brain - from the "primitive brain" that controls sensory input and survival, the "mid-brain" that controls behavioral and emotional regulation, to the "cortical brain" that orients thinking and learning. There are seven critical areas of impact on children across these different areas of the brain.

Seven Neurological Effects

1) Sensory Development

Children affected by trauma at a young age may have difficulty interpreting sensory experiences as they age. This can cause them to either over-react or under-react to sensory input like sounds, textures, or stimulating environments.

2) Dissociation

Dissociation is a survival mechanism that separates thoughts and feelings from experiences. It helps victims of trauma survive unbearable situations. However, this survival mechanism comes at a strong cost later as children can have experiences of amnesia, feelings that they "aren't real", feeling so disconnected from their body that it "doesn't belong to them", or identity confusion.

3) Attachment Development

Children's experience with caregivers early in life helps form their attachment style throughout their life. Essentially, attachment styles are the basic strategies a child adopts to feel safe around others. Trauma received from caregivers drastically affects this system, setting children up for intense difficulty feeling safe in relationships.

4) Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is a skill our brains learn by having caregivers help co-regulate emotions through responding in caring and soothing ways. For children whose early emotions are not met with care, but with ongoing trauma, their brains aren't able to learn this crucial skill. As a result, even as they age well past toddlerhood traumatized children can have great difficulty in understanding and regulating their emotions.

5) Behavioral Regulation

The brain's normal ability to control behavior naturally falls in a "window of tolerance" where our bodies and minds are not overwhelmed. Beyond this window, we begin to lose control of our behavior. For traumatized children, this window of tolerance can be very very small - such that seemingly normal requests send them into an emotional spiral that results in challenging behaviors.

6) Cognition

Due to the effects of trauma on a child's survival functions, most of their brain's resources are dedicated to managing fear responses and assessing if adults can be trusted. This leaves little room left for "higher functions" like planning, problem-solving, or learning.

7) Self Concept & Identity Development

Children who have experienced trauma often have a very deep sense of being unwanted, unloved, or "bad". They can feel as if they don't belong anywhere and are often in search of some source of validation.

This range of neurological impacts drastically affects the day-to-day experience of children who have experienced trauma. As they mature, these areas can begin to coalesce into complex mental health issues like anxiety, depression, or PTSD symptoms.

HOW CHILDREN HEAL FROM TRAUMA

As serious as the effects of trauma can be on a child's development, **the good news is that these children *can* experience healing!**

"The parent-child connection is the most powerful mental health intervention in the world." - Bessel van der Kolk, acclaimed trauma researcher and author of *The Body Keeps the Score*

Just as developmental trauma occurs within key relationships, so too can healing and repair. As Dr. Karen Triesman puts it, "Relationships heal relationship trauma." As parents and caregivers, you play a pivotal role in helping your children heal from the trauma they have experienced. It is in relationships that young people can experience the security, stability, love, and support that they need to thrive. As they receive the secure and safe relationships they didn't have earlier in life, it provides the opportunity for the brain to "re-wire" and for all seven areas of neurological impact to be repaired.

The experience of trauma is not the end of the story for children and teens. Both science and life show that individuals can heal, even from the deepest of wounds. Parents and caregivers are extremely important in the healing process - but it is vital to understand that "love" is not enough. It takes more than good intentions for children to heal from trauma. They need particular approaches to parenting and relationships that allow their trauma to be addressed. It is these concrete approaches that form the baseline of all trauma-informed care.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PARENTING: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Trauma-informed parenting is a holistic approach that recognizes the profound impact of trauma on a child's behavior and emotions. Trauma-informed parents strive to create an environment that not only addresses the immediate needs of the child but also supports their long-term healing.

"It's not about changing the child; it's about changing ourselves to meet the needs of the child." - Bryan Post, Author of From Fear to Love

Marks of a Trauma-Informed Home

1) Safety

A healing home is a safe home. Children must experience a sense of psychological safety in their family environment. This means they feel safe to have and express a range of emotions, they feel like life is predictable and understandable, and they experience a growing sense of well-being, pleasure, and mastery at home.

In Practice: Prioritize consistency and predictability in daily routines to create a sense of security. Be attuned to your child's emotional cues and respond with empathy and understanding. Help them build a sense of confidence in learning how to navigate the home, complete small tasks, and grow in independence.

"A healing environment is built on consistency, predictability, and emotional safety. Parents can actively contribute to this environment by being attuned to their child's needs and providing a stable foundation." - Dr. Laura Markham

2) Trusting Relationships

A trauma-informed parenting approach places connection at the heart of your parenting style. It can be very difficult for traumatized children to trust adults, but the work of slowly repairing their ability to trust is extremely important for their development and well-being. Creating trusting relationships throughout the family is the linchpin for long-term healing.

In Practice: Build habits of connection where your child feels seen and valued by you personally. Practice active listening, taking time to hear how your child is feeling and reflecting what they are saying back to them. Place a higher value on maintaining trust

than on "making" your child "behave right."

3) Coaching Emotional Regulation

Children who have experienced trauma need help regulating their emotions. As a caregiver, you play an important role in helping to co-regulate in response to what can feel like frightening or overwhelming emotions in the child's brain. Parents who practice trauma-informed care know that helping their children develop emotional regulation strategies is essential to their long-term well-being.

In Practice: Your first response to big emotions should be empathy. Help coach them through their emotional experience. Help them name and accept the emotions they are experiencing. Receive their emotions non-judgementally. Help them name how their body feels as they experience emotions like sadness or anger.

4) Empathetic Responses to Behavioral Challenges

Challenging behaviors often manifest as a result of a child's past experiences. Those behaviors are the language of a hurt child. Deciphering this language requires empathy, understanding, and a commitment to addressing the root causes rather than merely reacting to surface-level behaviors.

"While addressing immediate needs is crucial, trauma-informed parenting looks beyond crisis management. It focuses on long-term healing, understanding that building resilience takes time and commitment." - *Heather T. Forbes*

In Practice: Balance immediate responses with a commitment to the long-term healing journey. If the child is not immediately endangering themselves or others, prioritize trying to address the root emotions behind a behavior rather than the behavior itself. Recognize that progress may be gradual, and celebrate small victories along the way. Respond with empathy and strategies that address the underlying needs, promoting healing rather than punishment.

Building a Toolbox for Behavioral Challenges

"Developing a toolbox for behavioral challenges involves gathering a range of strategies tailored to your child's unique needs. It's about being flexible and adapting your approach to different situations." - Tina Payne Bryson

Curate a personalized toolbox of strategies, including calming techniques, positive reinforcement, and de-escalation methods. Avoid harsh punishments, yelling, or escalated reactions - as difficult as it may be!

IT'S A JOURNEY

Trauma-informed parenting is not a quick fix. There is no quick fix in the process for children to heal from deep psychological wounds. It is a journey - for both you and your child - with many ups, downs, setbacks, and victories. The deepest truth of trauma-informed parenting is understanding that it is a *process*. Embracing the process means accepting a lifelong journey of change that demands compassion, grace, and hope.

Parental Self-Care is Essential

The journey of trauma-informed parenting is the longest of marathons. Parenting children with trauma histories is emotionally demanding and it necessitates a commitment to self-care. Nicole Arzt, a licensed marriage and family therapist, aptly points out that "Self-care is not selfish; it's essential."

"Redefining self-care is essential. It's not just about pampering oneself; it's about actively prioritizing mental, emotional, and physical well-being to be a more effective and resilient caregiver." - Nicole Arzt

Expand your definition of self-care to include activities that promote mental and emotional well-being. Recognize that taking care of yourself enhances your ability to care for your child. Establish clear boundaries to prevent burnout. Seek support from friends, family, or professionals, and understand that prioritizing your well-being benefits both you and your child.

CONCLUSION

Trauma-informed parenting demands a profound understanding of trauma, attachment, and effective parenting techniques. As we navigate the challenges posed by behavioral issues, prioritize self-care, and foster communication and connection, we equip ourselves to provide the love and support these children desperately need. In the words of Deborah Gray,

"Every child is one caring adult away from being a success story."

Understanding Trauma-Informed Parenting for Foster Care

Knotts Family Agency



SUMMARY:

1

. Importance of Trauma-Informed Parenting: The article emphasizes the significance of traumainformed parenting in foster care, highlighting the need for special care and support for children who have experienced trauma.

2

Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Parenting: It outlines key principles including safety, trust, understanding the impact of trauma, collaboration, and support as essential components of trauma informed parenting for foster children.

3

Benefits of Trauma-Informed Parenting: Trauma-informed parenting is shown to promote healing, resilience, emotional regulation, positive attachment, and empowerment for children in foster care.

4

Challenges and Considerations: The article acknowledges the challenges faced by foster parents caring for children with trauma histories, emphasizing the need for patience, resilience, ongoing learning, and selfcare.

5

Transformative Potential: Trauma-informed parenting in foster care is highlighted as having transformative potential, offering children in foster care the support needed to heal, develop resilience, and for positive attachments for a brighter future.



Understanding Trauma-Informed Parenting for Foster Care

Parenting is a challenging yet rewarding journey, but when it comes to foster care, it becomes even more complex. Children in foster care have often experienced various forms of trauma, including abuse, neglect, or separation from their biological families. As a result, they require special care and support to heal and thrive. Trauma-informed parenting in foster care recognizes the impact of trauma on a child's development and provides an empathetic and healing environment. In this article, we will explore the significance of trauma-informed parenting and its profound effects on the well-being of children in foster care.

Understanding Trauma

Trauma refers to an experience or event that overwhelms a person's ability to cope, leaving them feeling helpless and fearful. For children in foster care, trauma is often a central part of their lives. It affects their emotional, cognitive, and social development, and without appropriate intervention, it can have long-lasting consequences.

The Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Parenting

1. **Safety:** Creating a safe and predictable environment is crucial for traumatized children. Foster parents should prioritize physical and emotional safety, establishing clear boundaries and consistency to provide a sense of security.
2. **Trust and Empathy:** Building trust is fundamental in trauma-informed parenting. Foster parents must demonstrate empathy, understanding, and patience, acknowledging and validating the child's experiences and emotions.
3. **Understanding the Impact of Trauma:** Recognizing that trauma can shape a child's behavior is vital. Foster parents should educate themselves about trauma and its effects, allowing them to respond to challenging behaviors with compassion rather than punishment.
4. **Collaboration and Support:** Effective trauma-informed parenting involves collaborating with professionals, therapists, and support networks. Foster parents should seek guidance and support, recognizing that they do not have to navigate this journey alone.

The Benefits of Trauma-Informed Parenting

1. **Healing and Resilience:** Trauma-informed parenting creates an environment where children feel safe to heal and develop resilience. By fostering a nurturing and consistent relationship, foster parents provide a foundation for emotional growth and recovery.
2. **Emotional Regulation and Self-Awareness:** Traumatized children often struggle with emotional regulation. Trauma-informed parenting focuses on teaching children coping mechanisms, self-regulation skills, and emotional awareness, helping them develop healthier ways of expressing their feelings.
3. **Positive Attachment:** Healthy attachments are vital for a child's well-being and development. Trauma-informed parenting emphasizes building secure attachments through trust, empathy, and consistent caregiving, laying the groundwork for future relationships.
4. **Empowerment and Autonomy:** Trauma can leave children feeling powerless and lacking control. Trauma-informed parenting promotes empowerment, giving children a voice in decision-making processes, and fostering their autonomy and independence.

Challenges and Considerations for Trauma-Informed Foster Care

Being a foster parent for a child with past trauma is not without its challenges. It requires patience, resilience, and a commitment to ongoing learning and growth. Foster parents must navigate the complexities of the child welfare system, advocate for their child's needs, and often face their own emotional triggers. Recognizing the importance of self-care and seeking support is crucial for foster parents to provide the best care possible.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed parenting in foster care holds immense transformative potential. By creating an environment of safety, trust, and understanding, foster parents can play a crucial role in a child's healing journey. With empathy, education, and collaboration, trauma-informed parenting nurtures resilience, emotional well-being, and positive attachments. Together, we can ensure that children in foster care have the support they need to overcome the challenges of their past and thrive in a brighter future.