

Trauma-Informed Care Series

This month, we bring you part two of an eight-part series about the effects of trauma on children and parenting through a trauma-informed lens. This information is courtesy of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. More information can be found at www.nctsn.org.

Module 2 – Identifying Trauma

by Kristi Shropshire

Trauma requires three specific criteria.

1. It is life-threatening or otherwise threatens physical damage to the child or someone close to the child such as an immediate family member.
2. It causes an overwhelming sense of terror and hopelessness.
3. There is an automatic and uncontrollable physical reaction, including but not limited to increased heart rate; release of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol; and loss of control of the bowel or bladder.

As a child experiences a traumatic event, they are taking in and associating information through all five senses. This is not a conscious process and the child may be unaware of the connections. However, children may respond to trauma reminders or triggers in the same way they responded to the original trauma.

Children who have survived traumatic experiences may:

- have trouble learning as they may struggle with focus and concentration. If this is the case, many foster parents can get help through the Legal Aid Center's educational surrogate program in order to request an individualized education plan (IEP) through the child's school.
- struggle falling asleep or staying asleep due to nightmares or flashbacks. A consistent routine with countdown reminders and patience seem to be the best remedy for this.
- demonstrate rapid mood changes. This is not on purpose and can be an example of a trauma reminder. They may not "act their age" and instead may act like a much younger child. Foster parents can meet the child at the age they are behaving as they often need nurturing they failed to receive in order to catch up to their developmental age.

Building a Relationship

While many children avoid talking about their trauma, others talk about the events they experienced in ways that can be confusing or disturbing. It is important to listen and validate them, although it may be difficult to avoid becoming emotional. Although nothing can entirely erase the effects of trauma, there are many factors that can promote resilience.

The quantity of quality relationships is the best rule of thumb. This means having at least one strong, supportive relationship with a competent and caring adult. In addition, children need to feel that their talents and abilities are recognized and nurtured and to feel some sense of control over their own lives.

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Building a Relationship, *continued*

Finally, being part of a larger community such as a faith-based group, after-school club, volunteer organization, or extended family can increase a child's feeling of connection, acceptance, and value. This is the foundation for recovery.

Trying Times & Defiance: Anne & "Jenny's" Story

In reviewing trauma and its impact in the family setting, one foster parent shared her experience.

Former foster parent, Anne Barrios has a foster youth "Jenny" who would share her story with any stranger that would listen. The specific details being very personal. Ms. Barrios allowed her child to do so as she was aware it was her child's way of taking ownership of her life and feeling in control.

However, in private, Mrs. Barrios would remind her child of appropriate boundaries throughout the day in order to avoid embarrassing her. During one-on-one time, she honed in on her child's strengths by baking with her, which was their favorite pastime together. They also attended church together on Sundays.

This mutually rewarding relationship is what got them through the trying times of tantrums and defiance. And eventually "Jenny" was able to rely less on sharing her story with strangers and instead seeking support with her consistent caregiver Ms. Barrios.

They both continue to cherish their relationship and speak fondly of each other since adoption by a biological family member occurred and the foster parent retired.