

Trauma Informed Care Series

Module 7

Becoming and Advocate

by Haley Watson, MAP

I would feel like I was just being passed around and not really knowing what was going on. No one explained anything to me. I didn't even know what rights I had...if I had any. No one told me what the meaning of foster care was. No one told me why I had been taken away from my mom. I knew there were bad things going on, but no one really explained it to me. -Luis

The child welfare system can be confusing even for adults; children like Luis may feel as though they are lost within a complicated system. As a foster parent, you work as a member of a professional team, and keeping the lines of communication open between members can help children like Luis-understand his circumstances. These team members are making life changing decisions for children in care. Although each team member should be working toward the same goal for the child, the child's voice can get lost in a large team. You, as the trauma-informed parent, can be the advocate for them.

WORKING AS A TEAM

- Common goal of safety and permanency for the child
- Clear roles and responsibilities in the team
- Have different relationships with the child
- Not all team members are equally trauma-informed

The common goal for each team should be the child's safety and development in a stable and loving home, as well as achieving their permanency goal. It is important that each team member has a clear understanding of their role and responsibility. Each member will have a different relationship with the child; some members will have a close positive relationship with your child while others may bring the child apprehension or conflict. Not all members of the team will see the child through the "trauma lens" and because of this, you have the opportunity to educate on and model the trauma-informed perspective.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF TRAUMA-INFORMED ADVOCACY

- Educate the team on how trauma has impacted your child
- Understand the need for psychological safety for children
- Explain the connection between your child's thoughts, feelings and behaviors
- Encourage the positive relationships in your child's life
- Promote your child's strengths and resiliency
- Understand the need for trauma-specific services that would benefit your child
- Be an advocate for yourself and reach out for your own support

Foster parents can be the best advocates for the youth in their home. You can help a child who feels as though their voice is not heard. Educate the team on how trauma has affected the development, beliefs of the world, and behaviors of your child. Understand how physical safety and psychological safety are different and important for your child. Remember the cognitive triangle? Explain how thoughts change our feelings, which in turn lead to certain behaviors. Support the relationships in your child's life that makes them feel connected; this may be their birth families, siblings, or friends. Help others see your child as more than a victim, point out their strengths and promote their resilience.

Not all services and not all therapists are trauma-informed. Advocate that the services your child is receiving are trauma-specific. Reaching out for your own support can be just as helpful as reaching out for your child. Knowing your limits and ensuring your self-care will keep you a happy and regulated foster parent!

TRAUMA-INFORMED TREATMENT

- Evidence based practice
- Assessment of child's trauma and needs
- Provides clear treatment plan
- Trauma-focused

There is no "one size fits all" treatment for children who have been victims of trauma. However, there is trauma-informed treatment that is based on scientific evidence. The comprehensive trauma assessment gathers information about the child's trauma and needs. It is then organized into a treatment plan. The development of this plan should include input from the foster parents, birth parents, and the county specialist. Trauma-focused therapy concentrates on the trauma the child has experienced as well as the traumatic stress symptoms. We as trauma-informed foster parents need to remember that it is never too late to seek help for a child with trauma-related problems. Advocate that your child receive this type of treatment if you feel that this would best help them.

THE SELF-ADVOCACY CYCLE

- Targeting
- Preparing
- Influencing
- Follow up

Targeting means that you identify what your child needs, and the services that best fit that need. Prepare yourself by asking lots of questions, attend classes or arrange a meeting with the service provider to answer these questions. It is also important to know the youth rights for your child and explain them to the child. Influencing can also mean partnership. Build relationships with the service providers and make connections to resources in your community. Make sure you are handling yourself as a professional, this will help you achieve a positive relationship with the service provider. Be accessible and organized when working to get a consistent schedule of services. Lastly, follow up; being an advocate is an important responsibility but there can be roadblocks along the way. Be honest and open about the concerns you have, use formal grievance procedures or go up the ladder until you are able to speak to a supervisor.

Advocacy is hard work—you can't give up and you can't sit back hoping others will do it for you. There is always hope.
-National Adoption Exchange

Advocacy: Nancy

Nancy is a foster mom to three children that have several services per week. The children each receive tutoring, speech therapy, occupational therapy, individual therapy, family therapy, basic skills training and psychosocial rehabilitation. The children also attend weekly visits that are supervised by Nancy. Nancy understands that the children benefit from these services due to their diagnoses and behavioral needs but she still is aware that these are growing children. Being a strong advocate for the children in her home, Nancy talked to the team for the children and described how the children are missing out on everyday kid activities. The boys in her home have talked about wanting to join soccer teams in their community and her foster daughter has been interested in swimming lessons.

With so many services, Nancy advocated that some services, such as speech and occupational therapy, could be completed while the children are at school. Nancy also suggested that individual and family therapy be the same day at the same location. By making these propositions, Nancy freed up two afternoons to allow for the foster boys to join their local soccer league and her foster daughter to have swim lessons. The children's biological family was also able to make it to the soccer games and swim lessons which could be a part of their supervised visitation plan. Nancy's advocacy was a prime example of how a foster parent can ensure treatment needs are met, but also respect the children's interests and development.



Haley Watson, MAP, is a Family Development Specialist at Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth (SAFY) of Nevada. Haley is a trainer for TIC, TFIC and PRIDE preservice training. Since 1984, SAFY has been a leader in the provision of programs and services that improve the safety and well-being of families, children and communities. SAFY is a national non-profit organization.

