

Trauma Informed Care Series

Module 6

Connections & Healing

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When you feel connected to something, that connection immediately gives you a purpose for living.

- Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD

WHAT ARE CONNECTIONS?

Connections are what help define who you are and where you fit in the world. "Connections" include your relationships with others, your understanding of the past, present and future, and your ties to places, objects and cultural practices.

Think about the most important connections in your life. Think about how they define your identity and shape your daily choices. Now imagine that all of those connections were taken from you. How do you feel? Who are you now? Where do you fit in?

This is the reality for every child in foster care. For many people, family is one of their greatest connections. For these kids, this is the first thing taken from them. Then comes everything else; their school, friends, neighborhood, room, favorite toys, culture, etc.

When you think about how you would feel in their shoes, it's easier to make sense of the behaviors and challenges they present in your home. Without healthy connections, children struggle with identity and self-esteem. They lack a sense of purpose and hope for the future.

Some of the children's past connections may not seem positive to you, but children will often make something good out of the bad. They have learned how to survive and are often extremely resilient. These strengths, along with many more, will be their foundation for healing. It is your job as a trauma-informed parent to help them identify these strengths and make sense of their past.

MAINTAINING HEALTHY CONNECTIONS

- Identify the child's interests, hobbies, skills and strengths
- Build self-esteem through extracurricular or family activities that highlight their strengths
- Explore keeping in contact with old friends, extended family members, teachers or church leaders who may be a positive connection

- Ask the birth family for information, advice, favorites, recipes, pictures or cultural traditions
- Talk positively about the child's birth family
- Incorporate the child's traditions and culture into your own

When you help children maintain the positive relationships they already have, you acknowledge their experiences and sense of self. When you encourage the creation of healthy new connections within your family, you are able to help them understand that they are safe and cared for, and have meaning in this new environment. It is possible to honor their past experiences and connections in a healthy way, while providing them opportunity to grow and feel safety in their current situation.

BUILDING NEW CONNECTIONS

- Document and celebrate special events, experiences and accomplishments
- Encourage them to identify positive memories
- Help them make a scrapbook, write an autobiography, design a collage, create a poem or song, or start a journal to represent their history - capture the pain, but also the positive experiences and their strengths
- Inspire them to set goals and look forward to future events
- Help them identify appropriate role models

Foster parents can be one of the most important positive connections to a child. The positive nurturing you provide can make the biggest impact on their healing process.

A great way to build a relationship is by providing them with opportunities to talk to you about all aspects of their lives, including their trauma and relationship with past caregivers. You may feel it is better for them to not talk about painful memories, but your ability to listen as a trusted caregiver is vital to healing. It is not important to initiate these conversations, only to be an open sounding board when they do.

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MAKING IT SAFE TO TALK

- Make the “unmentionable” mentionable - encourage children to not keep secrets and let them know they can talk to you about anything
- Correct mistaken beliefs and constantly reinforce that they are not responsible for what happened to them
- Expect the unexpected - disclosures will often come out in a casual way in random situations
- Be aware of your reactions, including body language - don't overwhelm them with your own emotions
- Be ready to actively listen - practice eye contact, be empathetic, repeat what you heard to clarify

- Avoid making unrealistic promises or trying to “make it all better”
- Praise their efforts for talking
- Provide constructive feedback - focus on the behavior of the perpetrator rather than judging their character
- Share important information with the team - report abuse and neglect as necessary

As you strive to identify and maintain positive connections from a child's past and help them develop new positive connections, they will begin to make sense of their past, heal and have hope for a better future.

Positive Connections: Jane & Jose

Identifying and maintaining positive connections was exemplified by foster parent, Jane, who had 7-year-old Jose in her home. Jose first presented with low self-esteem and was very angry with his birth mother.

For the first month, Jane focused on creating a life-book with Jose. She encouraged him to draw pictures of his home, family, school and dog. She engaged him in conversations about things he liked and missed about them.

Jane made sure to never say anything negative about his family or neighborhood. She actively listened when he vented angry feelings about his mom. Jane made sure to have open conversation with Jose's therapist and encouraged Jose to share his feelings with the therapist too.

At visits, Jane was warm to Jose's mother and asked her about his favorite foods and holiday traditions.

Jose's mother shared that on Christmas Eve they always attend Midnight Mass. Jane and her family attended that year with Jose and shared some of their Christmas traditions with him as well. They wanted Jose to feel that his identity and culture were important. Jose expressed interest in art so Jane enrolled him in community art classes.

Over several months, Jane reported that Jose was excelling in art and she had seen a remarkable difference in his self-esteem. He expressed less anger towards his mother and even told Jane that he liked that she and his mom were friends. Jose was able to reunify with his mother and still keeps in contact with Jane.

This is just one example of the positive impact foster parents can have on children when they help them maintain positive connections from their past, build new connections and make it safe to talk.