

## Forecasting the Unknown: *Possible Long-term Effects of Trauma*

Today, more than ever before, foster and adoptive parents are learning, hearing, and dealing with the impacts of trauma on youth and young adults and how they can help youth who have experienced trauma react, respond, and heal. As we all learn about different types of trauma and how a youth's body and brain are affected, we are also learning more and more about long-term and possibly lifelong effects that can result from exposure to trauma.

*Child traumatic stress* occurs when children are exposed to events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope and interfere with daily life. Research on the impact of trauma has confirmed that such trauma can affect a child and adolescent's brain, body, behavior, and ways of thinking. The impacts may reach throughout a child's development stages and possibly even into adulthood.

*Complex trauma* refers to prolonged exposure to a stressful event. This would include children and youth who have grown up in physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abusive households. Ongoing trauma often disrupts children's sense of security, safety, and sense of themselves, and alters the way they see and respond to people and situations in their lives.



### Transitioning Into Adulthood

Experiencing traumatic stress as a child can have a significant impact on an adult's quality of life. Research has demonstrated that trauma has an impact on children and youth throughout their development stages and into adulthood. The impact can be felt across multiple areas; such as emotional health, physical health, mental health, and personal relationships.

#### *Emotional Health:*

Survivors of childhood traumatic stress can often experience feelings of anxiety, worry, shame, guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, grief, sadness, and anger. As a foster parent, you can be a supportive and

nurturing caregiver. Work with the children and youth in your care and help them learn how they can regulate their emotions and reactions and strengthen their ability to adapt to adversity. This is part of developing resilience—the ability to meet and overcome challenges in ways that maintain or promote emotional well-being.

*Mental Health:* Surviving childhood traumatic stress has been linked with higher rates of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, suicide and self-harm, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), drug and alcohol misuse, and relationship difficulties. If you are caring for a child or youth

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whom you believe is struggling with substance abuse, depression, anxiety, unhappiness, or other complaints that you suspect are at least partially caused by traumatic childhood experiences, you may want to seek out therapeutic treatment that is trauma informed or trauma specific.

**Physical Health:** Studies show that, the more adverse childhood experiences a person has, the higher their risk of health and wellness problems later in life. Adults who have been exposed to abuse and trauma as children may develop a heightened stress response. This can impact their ability to regulate their emotions, lead to sleep difficulties, lower immune function, fatigue, muscle tension, lack of focus, and increase the risk of a number of physical illnesses throughout adulthood. Encouraging regular exercise can have a positive impact on their overall physical health and wellness. Introducing the benefits of mindfulness, yoga, meditation, as well as other forms of relaxation and restfulness, can provide young people with beneficial coping skills that they can utilize throughout their lives.

### **Strategies that Promote Healing**

As we learn more about the effects of trauma, we also learn more about trauma informed resources that may have a positive effect for children and youth with trauma histories. First, foster and adoptive families are encouraged to create a home environment that includes:

- Stability
- Predictability
- Nurturing
- Understanding
- Open communication
- Ongoing support

Parents and caregivers just like you play a critically important role in the healing process throughout childhood and into adulthood. Children and youth who have experienced traumatic events need to feel safe, secure, and loved. As foster and adoptive parents, you are

fulfilling that need each and every day. And, by providing that safety and security, you are teaching them how to cope, heal, and even thrive.

Following are some additional ways you can not only help children and youth heal from trauma, but also help them understand how trauma may impact them in the future.

- Become trauma informed by attending trainings, reading books, and talking with experts in trauma informed care.
- Try not to take children or adolescent's behavior personally.
- Practice patience on a consistent and continual basis.
- Allow a safe space for adolescents and young adults to share whatever it is that they are comfortable in sharing about their past traumatic experiences.
- Parent support groups can be a great source of information, insight, and collective knowledge.
- Know that healing from trauma will take time. For youth and young adults who have experienced trauma, just knowing that you will be there to support them along their journey will be empowering.

*"Instead of saying, 'I'm damaged, I'm broken, I have trust issues,' say, 'I'm healing, I'm rediscovering myself, I'm starting over.'"*  
— Horacio Jones

Your comforting, positive, and patient attitude and approach will have a significant influence on a young person's trauma recovery. Very often, individuals who have experienced trauma tend to blame themselves for their own victimization. Help assure the children and youth in your care that they are not responsible or to blame, and continually reassure them that you will be there to support them unconditionally through difficult times.

It is never too late (or too soon) for survivors of trauma to pursue healing. Recovery is possible. You are teaching these trauma survivors how to better cope in their daily lives by providing a nurturing family and support system. And, by instilling a sense of hope, safety, and security, you will empower these young people to follow the path to continued healing and growth.



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# How Personal Trauma Can Change the Way You Parent

Parenting is a tough job that no one can be 100% prepared for. We bring our own stories and experiences—both good and bad—along with us on our parenting journey. Some of those bad times may even have been traumatic experiences. Trauma can stem from many things: car accidents, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, loss of a loved one, and threats of life being just a handful of examples.

As parents, we know how vulnerable young children can be. When children are exposed to distress or traumatic experiences, we also know how vitally important it is that parents or caregivers are there to support and help them process their experiences as soon as possible after the event. This is a difficult task for any

parent; however, for a parent who has themselves experienced trauma, it may become an even greater challenge. How does your own history of trauma change the way you parent?

When you become a parent, it's natural to look to or reflect on the way we ourselves were parented. We've all heard people say things like, "When I was a kid . . ." or, "In my day . . ." It makes sense; we learn by example. Yet, for those who have experience with trauma, those parenting examples may not be how you want to raise and care for the children in your home.

First and foremost, being aware of your trauma is key. Working through your own thoughts and feelings about your personal history will help you identify the "instinctive" reactions that might come up in your parenting—and will also help you determine what changes you would like to make in how you care for children and youth.

The next hurdle is knowing, understanding, and acknowledging that parenting is a tough job—for **all** parents. Kids will push our buttons and test boundaries and trigger many different reactions in all of us on any given day. There will be reminders or situations that push us to the point of "losing it." In those instances, try to take a breath or a step back so that you can recognize what is happening—what feelings are coming

out? What natural, instinctive response are you leaning on?

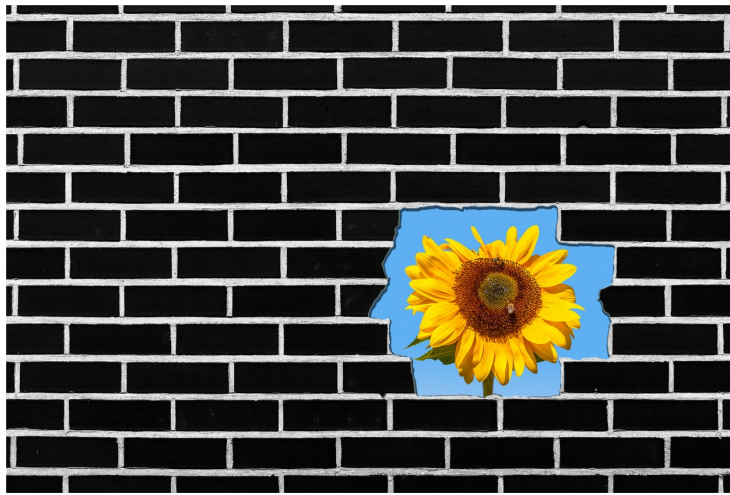
You might find yourself repeating phrases such as, "Now look what you have done!" or disciplining in a manner that we try to justify because it is how we were disciplined—even if, intellectually, we know that method of discipline has proven ineffective or not

beneficial. You might be responding with intimidation—yelling, becoming a "larger than life" presence, slamming a fist on a table, or being manipulative are all responses that can create a sense of fear in children.

Another way a history of trauma may shape your parenting is a general overall overreaction to how you were parented. For example, if your parents were very strict, you may instinctually seek to be hands-off, even to the point of being too lenient.

Feedback—even that which we give ourselves—can be hard to hear. It's tempting to feel defensive or want to justify our parenting style because of what we have experienced. The challenge for all those parents who have experienced trauma is to not allow that history to dictate our futures. Rather, the goal is to be aware of our parenting and to be willing to change as needed.

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## ***How Personal Trauma Can Change the Way You Parent, continued from page 3***

Trauma can certainly shape you as a parent and will affect how you exist with the children you are raising. Know that you are still able to be a capable, loving parent despite your own trauma. Parenting while healing from your own trauma is brave. No one hands you a trophy, you don't win

awards, and it is often done in silence. Being aware of, healing from, and learning how to live with your own trauma is crucial in caring for the children in our lives who also have experienced trauma.

### **Resources**

#### *Tip Sheets*

- [Parenting Siblings Connected through Trauma](#)
- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma](#)

#### *Other Library Resources*

- *Child Trauma Handbook: A Guide for Helping Trauma Exposed Children*, by Ricky Greenwaid
- "Understanding Childhood Trauma: Identifying & Responding to Trauma in Children 6 to Adolescence" (DVD)
- *Trauma Through a Child's Eyes*, by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline
- *Healing Days—A Guide for Kids Who Have Experienced Trauma*, by Susan Farber Straus
- "Trauma, Brain & Relationship: Helping Children Heal" (DVD)

#### *Additional Web Resources*

- [ChildTrauma Academy](#)
- [Echo Training](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Center on the Developing Mind: Harvard University](#)
- [AdoptUSKids Understanding Trauma](#)
- [Find a Trauma and PTSD Therapist](#)
- [Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care](#)
- [7 Ways Your Childhood Affects How You'll Parent](#)

We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at [\*\*info@wifostercareandadoption.org\*\*](mailto:info@wifostercareandadoption.org).

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