WINTER 2019

COALITION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

PARTNERS

THE NEWSLETTER FOR WISCONSIN'S ADOPTIVE & FOSTER FAMILIES

FROM THE CORNER OFFICE

Wow, what a rocky beginning to the new year for Wisconsin! Snowstorm after snowstorm and a Polar Vortex, as well. With the official start of spring only about a month away, here's hoping our weather patterns get into a much more tolerable pattern.

Some years ago, we spent an entire year focusing on the topic of trauma. So much has changed in the intervening years that we thought it was time to turn our attention back to trauma for this Winter 2019 edition of *Partners*.

As adoptive and foster parents, you are truly on the front line of trauma informed care. So we look to you for your thoughts about the articles included in this quarter's newsletter. What questions do you still have about providing the best care for children and youth who have experienced trauma? What further supports do you wish were available to you along your journey? Please remember that we are always only a phone call or email away. It's okay to need help sometimes and it's okay to ask for what you need.

Thank you for being champions for children.

Best,

Oriana Carey

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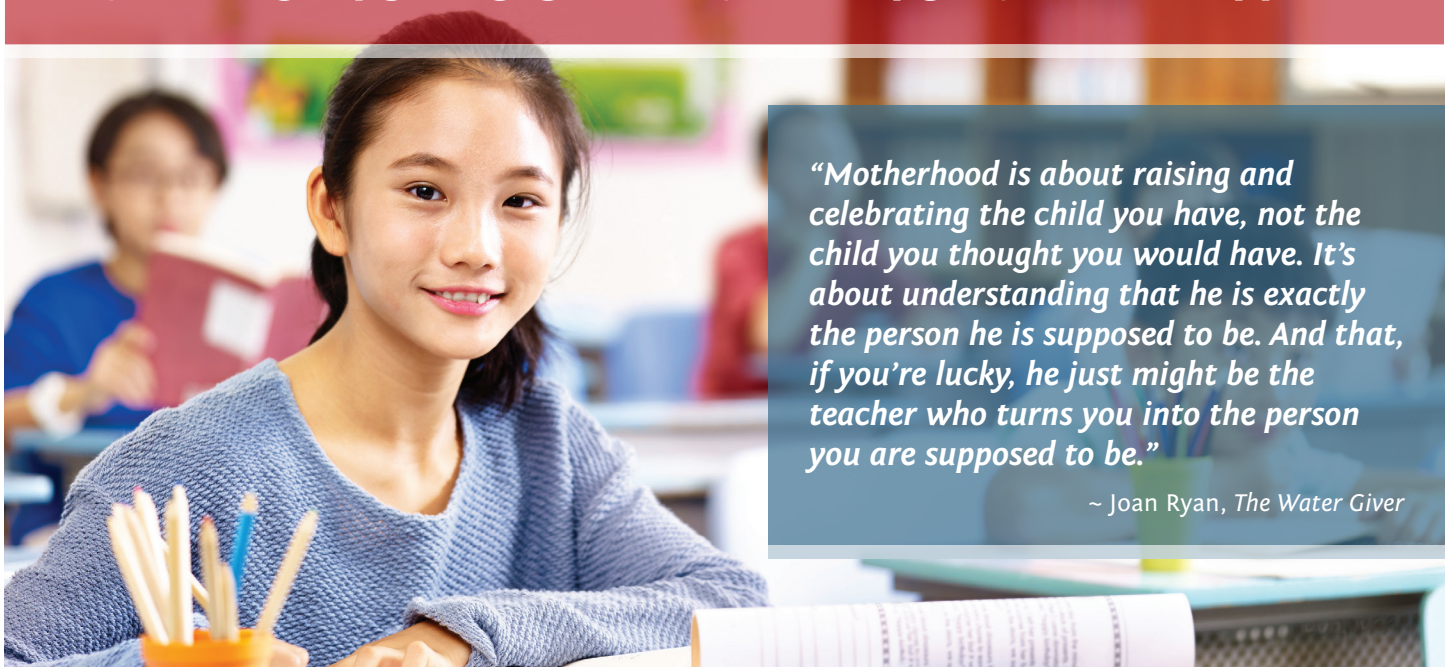
EMBRACING YOUR FAMILY NO MATTER WHAT



"Motherhood is about raising and celebrating the child you have, not the child you thought you would have. It's about understanding that he is exactly the person he is supposed to be. And that, if you're lucky, he just might be the teacher who turns you into the person you are supposed to be."

~ Joan Ryan, *The Water Giver*

Avie will be the first to admit that she had a romanticized vision of adoption when she and her husband Rob traveled to China to meet their baby girl, Lin. She imagined walking into the orphanage, her eyes locking with the child who was destined to be hers, and the little one outstretching her arms to be scooped up into her loving embrace. She would bring her beautiful baby home where she would flourish with the best medical care, nutrition, education, and, most importantly, loving parents who would dote on her every need.

The reality was that her new little girl wanted nothing to do with her, cried almost constantly, didn't want to be held, avoided eye contact, couldn't keep food down, and seemed angry all the time.

Avie reluctantly admits that, as much as she loved Lin instantly, she wondered if they'd made a mistake in adopting her. "I was convinced that she hated me and we'd made her life miserable by taking her away from everything that was familiar. I felt so guilty. I wish I'd known more back then. We were too excited about how we imagined it would be to be properly prepared for her reality."

Where Avie imagined a baby shower and introducing their new daughter to family and friends, Lin seemed terrified of people and screamed around everyone except Rob. There were medical appointments, therapy appointments, and lab tests to address intestinal parasites, severe food allergies, and a host of other medical and emotional issues. There were several surgeries and time spent in the hospital. This was not how it was supposed to be for Avie and Rob, but most importantly, for Lin. This was not the fun, carefree, "better" life they'd wished for their little girl.

Lin gradually began to mend and heal, while Avie and Rob began learning all they could about trauma and attachment. They connected with another adoptive family at a training and began building a support system.

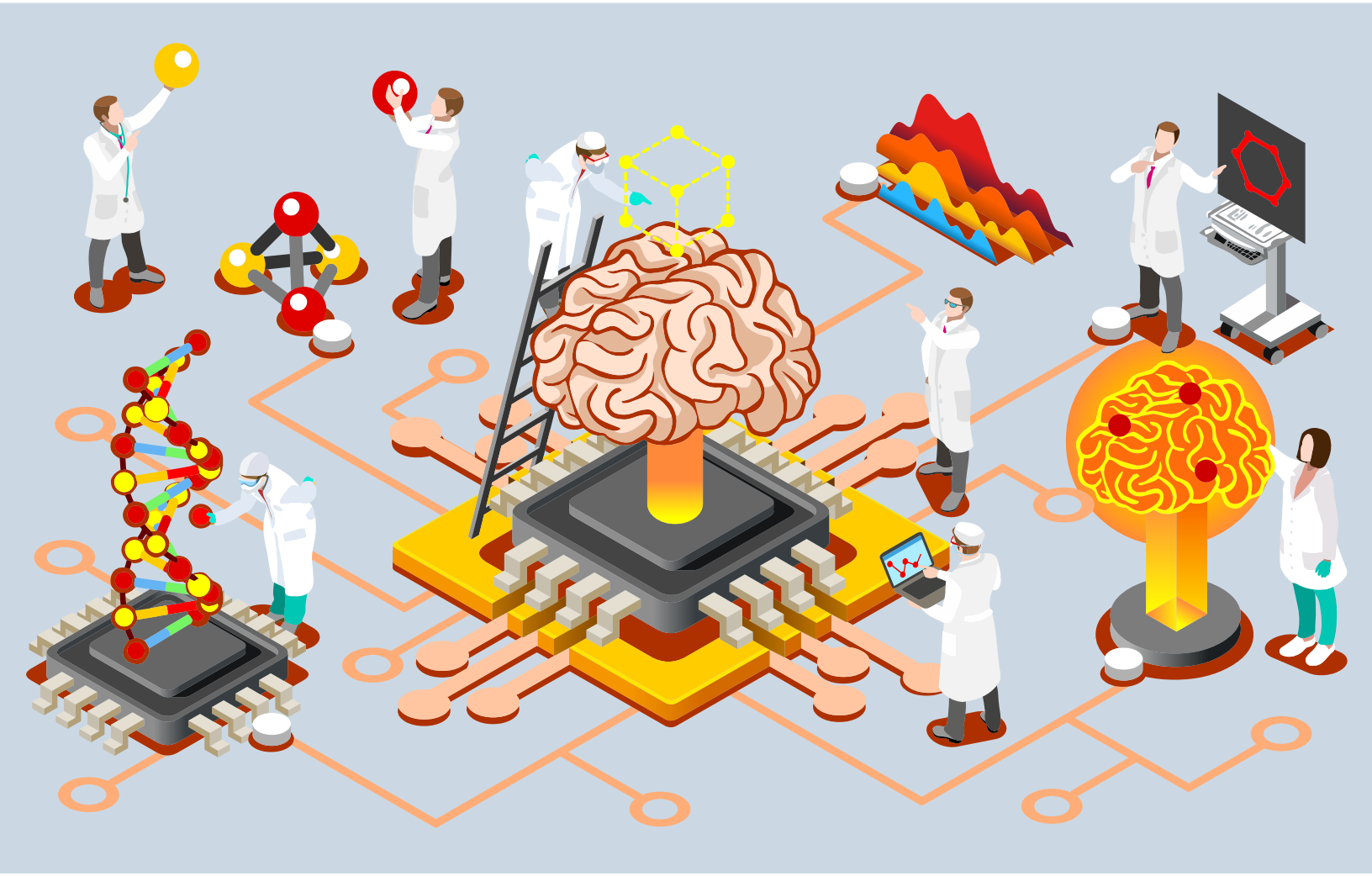
Little by little, things began to improve. As Lin began feeling better, the screaming spells became fewer and the constant rage was replaced by mild annoyance, then occasional moments of connection.

"I still remember the first time I made her laugh. She was in her high chair and I stubbed my toe. I was hopping on one foot in pain saying 'ouch, ouch, ouch' when her startled look turned to a smile and then a giggle. Not exactly the best way to get her to smile, but it was a start." Avie spent the next several months pretending to crash into furniture and saying "Ouch!"

Lin's personality began to emerge and Avie discovered she loved playing "dress up" and "beauty salon." Although she still wouldn't let Avie hold her, Lin loved to have her hair brushed and to brush Avie's hair. "It only took five years, but one day she actually climbed into my lap to put barrettes in my hair. I remember not moving, afraid I'd scare her off. Eventually, she worked her way up to sitting on my lap to read books. We celebrated every little step forward, one day at a time."

Today Lin is a happy pre-teen who laughs easily and loves attending school (but still gets annoyed with Avie occasionally). Avie says she and Rob would do it again in a heartbeat, and are considering expanding their family. Her advice to new parents? "I'm convinced it's impossible to have realistic expectations about parenting. Learning more about trauma was a huge help. I stopped taking things so personally. It wasn't until I let go of how I imagined it would be that I could relax into being the best mom I could be to my girl. That allowed Lin to relax into being parented. She's an amazing girl and teaches me something new every day."

THE IMPACT OF **TRAUMA** ON YOUR CHILD'S BRAIN AND DEVELOPMENT

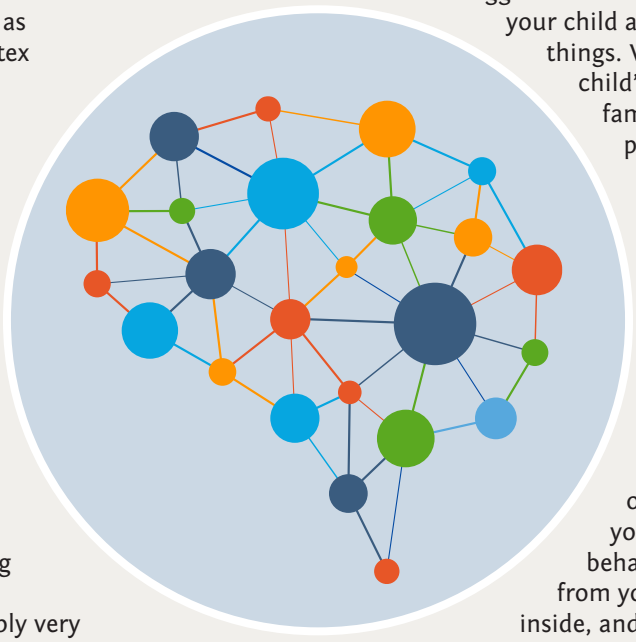


You may have noticed the child whom you adopted struggling with handling transitions, with making friends, or with accepting direction at school. Maybe your child explodes at the slightest frustration, or is defiant to an extreme degree. Maybe your child tells untruths even when there is nothing to gain by doing so. You know all parents have their challenges with their kids, but you feel as though things go much deeper with your child. What, if anything, is the role that adoption might play? If your child experienced trauma before coming to your care, when they were removed from the care of a birth parent, or even before birth, there are some things to understand about trauma.

What is trauma exactly? Trauma is "any stressful event which is prolonged, overwhelming, or unpredictable."* All children who have been removed from the care of a birth parent, whether that happened right after birth, or later on, have likely experienced trauma. Some children even experience trauma "in utero," or in the womb.

Trauma impacts your child in many ways, two of the most significant being social and emotional development. The effects of trauma on social and emotional development arise from how a child's brain processes events during and after trauma. Trauma causes your child to react to the world from a place of fear. Your child feels an overwhelming urge to protect his or her very survival by running, fighting, or freezing (called the "fight, flight, or freeze response"). This urge comes from a powerful, primitive part of the brain which evolved to save our lives from very real dangers in the distant past of human history.

The "fight, flight, or freeze" response happens automatically in the limbic system, which is a lower, deeper part of the brain. When the limbic system is active, the pre-frontal cortex is not, meaning your child is not able to use higher-level thinking skills, such as problem solving. The pre-frontal cortex is also responsible for language. So, when a child experiences trauma, the brain has trouble processing the experience in the context of language. This is why your child is very often not able to put into words what's happening when he or she is acting out or exhibiting "fight, flight, or freeze" reactions. The thinking that happens is very instinctual, emotional, and difficult to control.



In utero trauma can occur from anything that causes the growing fetus extreme stress. A mother taking drugs or alcohol is an obvious one. However, even a mother who is simply very stressed herself, perhaps because she didn't want to be pregnant, or because her partner is abusive, affects the development of her unborn baby. A pregnant mom who is traumatized is flooding her body with stress hormones. The unborn baby, of course, has the same chemicals flowing to it through the placenta. A baby is affected to a great degree because their neural system is still immature, and developing at a very fast rate. Children who were adopted may have experienced some of this flooding of stress hormones before birth.

What exactly do stress hormones, like cortisol, do? Cortisol puts us on hyper-alert, and is designed to get our bodies reacting quickly and with a lot of determination, as anyone with a child who has experienced trauma can testify. For example, have you ever felt like your child seems intent on defying you to an extreme degree? Or, when your child is experiencing escalating emotions, does it feel like a challenge to help her get back to a place of calm? It's quite likely that such behavior can be chalked up to the biology of trauma responses.

Over time, this steady stream of stress hormones affects a child's neurodevelopment. As children live their day to day lives in this state of hyper-arousal, they miss out on learning healthy, social ways of coping with stress. They may find relationships with parents, siblings, or peers threatening, because any level of stress sets off this hyper state of arousal, fear, and reaction. We sometimes characterize this set of behaviors as "attachment disorder." Children who have been adopted may be at a much higher risk for attachment issues than other kids.

Attachment problems can happen for a number of reasons, one of which is when a child is continuously expecting to be hurt. In such cases, a child may develop social and emotional patterns that center around avoiding the very people who are supposed to be caring for and providing for them. The simplest of gestures could feel threatening. Even something that appears to be fun or nurturing, like your invitation to snuggle on the sofa, can be stress-inducing, because your child associates caregivers with bad things. When trauma has affected your child's ability to attach to you or other family members, typical ways of parenting just won't work.

Because children are not all on the same developmental pathway and are unique individuals, parents may be confronted with a variety of behaviors, depending on the child and what they have experienced. A child may show defiance, hyperactivity, lack of focus and attention, rigidity, aggressiveness, or any number of other challenging behaviors. If your child is showing any of these behaviors, it very well may be a sign from your child that they are hurting inside, and trauma could be at the root of it. Educating yourself on what "normal" child development looks like and being aware when things don't seem quite right is the first step in helping your child get what they need to heal, grow, and thrive.

The more you understand how trauma impacts your child, the more inspired you may be to accept the reality of trauma's effects on your child, be easier on yourself in understanding how difficult this journey can be, and learn and practice a trauma-informed approach so that your child has the best chance of healing. Raising a child who has experienced trauma is not easy, so understanding where your child's challenges came from gives you the space to accept the difficulties, to accept your child, and to accept yourself for needing outside support.

* Definition from the Post Institute for Family-Centered Therapy

MY ADOPTION JOURNEY

One Woman's Story

BY LIBBY BUDDE

The first time I thought about adoption as trauma was when I was 12 years old. I was adopted at birth by two loving parents and raised in a small city in central Wisconsin. I had an older sister to look up to and my life always felt pretty normal. While I did not know much about my birth father, I did know that my birth mother did not struggle with any alcohol or drug abuse issues and I had never experienced anything overtly traumatic. The small city my family lived in was predominantly Caucasian (as are my parents) and, while no one was ever outwardly racist, as an African American woman, I did know I was different.

At 12, I started feeling more curious about who I was. There was a group of people out there who I did not know, but who probably looked a lot like me. I couldn't help but wonder if I acted like them or shared other traits and characteristics with them. My identity started to become something that I was questioning a lot.

I think the idea of adoption as a trauma is a deeply personal one and something that every adoptee may feel and react differently to. While it may not be the case for every adopted person—it wasn't for my sister—the constant reminder that I was different was traumatic for me.

My main struggle was not feeling "black enough." It felt as though everything around me was not who I was supposed to be; it was not my culture and that is what I longed for—even more than a connection with my biological family. When I started attending college in Milwaukee, I immersed myself in black culture, trying to find out who I was. But it wasn't easy. For 18 years, I had grown up in another culture. It took me a while to feel accepted and comfortable around people who looked like me.

I felt like I was missing a piece of who I was. As I searched to find myself, I was making bad decisions about things like who I dated and not caring about the important things in life, like my college education. I still wonder if what I went through was normal, not specific to my adoption, but just being a pre-teen and then a young woman trying to figure out who she was.

In time, I started to heal. I attended therapy, kept a journal, read books that offered insight, and focused on my faith. One book that really helped me was *Uninvited: Living Loved When You Feel Less Than, Left Out, and Lonely*, by Lysa TerKeurst. As I read, I realized that what I was feeling was normal. The book also gave me the tools to break free from what was keeping me from my true self.

I believe every adoption story is unique. For me, adoption was traumatic in the sense that having been adopted made me question who I was. When I was younger, that made me angry. Today, I feel like being adopted has made me a stronger person. The journey I took led me to place where I could accept myself and, in the end, I was able to let go of any hurt, pain, and anger.

To parents, I say that the most important things you can do for your children is to let them know that you are there for them, you love them, and you support them. Your child's thoughts and feelings about adoption may change throughout their lives. There will be times when your child is ready to share their thoughts and feelings about adoption, and there will be times when they may not be ready to talk. Let your child know that you are there for them no matter what.

Adoption is so special to me now and I am thankful that I was able to overcome the negative feelings I had about it. The resources and support I found are exactly what the Coalition also has to offer to everyone touched by adoption. Please know that we are here to be a partner for you and your whole family—every step of the way.

SAFE TO LEARN:

TRAUMA SENSITIVE SCHOOLS

Every child who has been adopted has experienced trauma on some level, some more so than others. And the science is clear: trauma impacts learning. A child who has suffered trauma is likely to struggle with concentration, memory, language development, emotional regulation, social skills, and forming trusting relationships. All of these skills are foundations for learning.

We all learn and retain information best when we are in a calm and regulated state. A child who is on high alert or always in "fight, flight, or freeze mode" is simply not accessing parts of the brain where learning can take place. For a child who experiences traumatic stress, as many of our children do, school can feel like an overwhelming place with danger around every corner. Often children respond to this stress with behavioral issues that can frustrate teachers and disrupt learning for everyone.

So how do we help children with trauma feel safe enough to learn?

More and more schools are recognizing that, to be effective, they must create an environment where children feel safe physically, emotionally, socially, and academically. What that looks like for each individual school can vary, but there are some basics:

A shared school-wide understanding of trauma. Everyone from teacher's aides to custodial staff need to understand how trauma impacts children and their behaviors before they can respond in ways that help regulate rather than escalate.

A safe, quiet retreat space where a child can take a break from overwhelming stimulus and self-regulate.

A zero tolerance bullying policy.

A school-wide program where students, faculty, and staff are taught and practice mindfulness skills, such as deep breathing or meditation. Many schools are now beginning and ending the school day with these practices and seeing dramatic decreases in behavioral issues and increases in school attendance and academic success.

As parents of children who have suffered trauma, it falls upon us to ask questions when choosing our children's schools, including early childhood education facilities. Is your child's school trauma sensitive? Has staff been trained in trauma informed care? Are teachers and staff trained in identifying trauma related behaviors and recognizing when a child is in distress? What safe and supportive practices are in place at your child's school?

In coming together as parents, educators, policymakers, community members, and even students, we can create trauma sensitive schools where every child has an opportunity to learn.

RESOURCES

Tip Sheets

- Parenting Siblings Connected through Trauma
- Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma

Library Materials

- *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)*

Library

- ***Trauma Sensitive Schools,*** **WI Department of Public Instruction**
- ***Mindfulness in Schools***
- ***Helping Traumatized Children Learn***
- ***The Adopted Child: Trauma and its Impact***

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wifostercareandadoption.org
postadoptccyf.org

An umbrella of services over foster care and adoption; information and referral; recruitment; training, education and support for families and professionals.