

# The Trauma Informed Foster Parent

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## Introduction

Having a foster child in your home means you have a child in your home who has experienced trauma. Even the act of being removed from their home which was deemed unsafe and into your home which is safe is traumatizing. Keep in mind just because they are safe and in your home does not mean they are free from the burdens of the trauma they have experienced and the separation they are going through from their family. In this resource, you will learn about trauma, trauma reaction, triggers, tips and tools you can implement, the value of self-care, and what resources are available.

First, watch this video called [ReMoved](#). This video gives an example of what life is like through the child's eyes and will be used as reference throughout this resource.

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# Trauma

Tough watch, wasn't it? Through this child's eyes you can see some of the trauma she has been through.

What is trauma? According to [Traumainformedcare.org](http://Traumainformedcare.org), trauma results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are life-threatening or emotionally disturbing with lasting adverse effects on the person's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being and functioning.

## Traumatic experiences include (but are not limited to):

- Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Living with a family member with mental health or substance use disorders
- Sudden, unexplained separation from a loved one
- Poverty
- Racism, discrimination, and oppression
- Violence in the community, war, or terrorism.

The examples from ReMoved include: observing family violence, receiving physical and verbal abuse, witness to substance abuse, being removed from her home, abuse from foster parents, and separation from her brother.

## Effects of Trauma

In this section, we are going to get a little more specific on the adverse effects of trauma. Although trauma can occur at any age, it has particularly long-term effects on children's developing brains and how that in turn, affects how they feel, behave and interact. Below you will find some examples of the ways in which trauma may affect brains, bodies, emotions, and behaviors.

<u>Trauma's effects on the brain:</u>	<u>Trauma's effect on the body</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulty thinking, learning, and concentrating</li><li>• Impaired memory</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inability to control physical responses to stress</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty switching from one task to another</li> <li>• Constantly in fight, flight, or freeze mode</li> <li>• Overactive amygdala (fear center)</li> <li>• Underactive prefrontal cortex (thinking center)</li> <li>• Underactive anterior cingulate cortex (emotional regulation center)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chronic illness -even into adulthood (heart disease, obesity, autoimmune disorders)</li> <li>• Somatic symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, and other aches and pains unable to be medically explained)</li> </ul>
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<u>Trauma's effects on emotions</u>	<u>Trauma's effects on behavior</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Hypervigilance</li> <li>• Inability to regulate emotions</li> <li>• Difficulty forming attachments</li> <li>• Trouble with friendships</li> <li>• Trust issues</li> <li>• Feeling numb and detached</li> <li>• Depression, anxiety, PTSD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of impulse control</li> <li>• Fighting, aggression, running away</li> <li>• Substance abuse</li> <li>• Suicide/suicidal ideation</li> <li>• Self-harm</li> <li>• Food hoarding</li> <li>• Appearing detached, "head in the clouds" -dissociation</li> </ul>

\*If you are on your phone or tablet, you may need to scroll left and right to see the table.

Trauma can affect children's brains, bodies, behaviors, and ways of thinking. In the list above, you see that children are more likely to develop depression and anxiety. Children are also more likely to develop ADHD, relationship and attachment issues, and physical effects (also called: somatic responses) such as migraines, IBS, stomach aches, autoimmune disorders, and other unexplained aches and pains.

Ongoing trauma can disrupt a child's sense of security, safety, and sense of themselves. It alters the way they see and respond to the world. If a child has experienced trauma, their brain is wired for protection, so they may be more emotionally aroused and unable to self-soothe. Those who have developed trauma may have unhealthy habits and behaviors such as increased aggression, distrusting and disobeying adults, poor self-hygiene, food hoarding, sneaking, lying, stealing, etc.

This does not make the child "bad." Keep in mind: these behaviors may have helped protect them in the past and these behaviors are strongly rooted. It will take time, patience, consistency, and oftentimes therapeutic intervention to address and overcome these

behaviors. Also note: behavior has meaning. Behind children’s behavior, there is meaning. They may not know how to communicate what is going on inside of them. So, look to their behavior as communication.

**EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN**

## Childhood Trauma

An event that a child finds overwhelmingly distressing or emotionally painful, often resulting in lasting mental and physical effects.

**2x** more likely to develop **DEPRESSION**

**3x** more likely to develop **ANXIETY DISORDERS**

**Common causes:**

- Child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- Witness/victim of violence
- Neglect
- Substance misuse
- Bullying in school
- Grief
- War/Terrorism
- Medical trauma
- Mental illness
- Separation from loved ones

**LONG-TERM IMPACTS:**

- Affects perception of reality
- Wires brain to expect danger
- Triggers fight, fright or freeze response
- Creates relationship problems
- Takes away sense of safety
- Increases stress hormones flowing through the body
- Creates a sense of helplessness
- Results in serious behaviour problems

**“The initial trauma of a young child may go underground but it will return to haunt us”**  
James Garbarino

**PREFRONTAL CORTEX (PFC)**  
"Thinking Centre"  
**Underactivated**  
Difficulties concentrating & learning.

**AMYGDALA**  
"Fear Centre"  
**Overactivated**  
Difficulty feeling safe, calming down, sleeping

**ANTERIOR CINGULATE CORTEX (ACC)**  
"Emotion Regulation Centre"  
**Underactivated**  
Difficulties with managing emotions.

**Complex Trauma: a result of repetitive, prolonged trauma**

[www.70-30.org.uk](http://www.70-30.org.uk)  
@7030Campaign

For more information on adverse childhood experiences (also known as ACEs), watch this [video](#). This is a popular Ted talk that gives great information on ACEs and the long term effects.

Now that you have a better understanding of how trauma can affect an individual, the next section will discuss triggers and what that looks like.

## #Triggered

When your child is behaving in a way that is unexpected and seems irrational or extreme, they may be experiencing a triggered response. *A trigger is some aspect of a traumatic event that occurs in a completely different situation, but reminds the individual of the original event.*

Examples of triggers can include sounds, smells, feelings, places, postures, and tones in voice. In the ReMoved video, you saw she became triggered by the gift of a dress.

Youth who have experienced trauma may reenact past patterns when they feel unsafe or become triggered. Depending on whether the child has a “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze”

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response, they may appear to be throwing a tantrum (as in the ReMoved video), seem to be distant or elsewhere mentally, or defiant. Remember what we talked about with the brain? The amygdala (the fear center) is overactive, so when a child is triggered, the amygdala is going off, telling them to protect themselves. Responses to triggers are best thought of as reflexes - they are not deliberate or planned. When a child becomes triggered, they are not able to consider the consequences of their behavior or its affect on others *-they are simply in survival mode.*

Here is a good video on understanding how the brain responds to triggers. Click [here](#).

Understanding triggers and trauma helps you gain understanding, compassion and empathy. Bringing awareness and understanding to this matter is crucial on this journey because through understanding, you yourself will be less reactive which will help bring a sense of safety and control. Now that you have a better understanding, let's talk about what you can do to help.

### **What do I do?**

Below, is an infographic on what to do. Most important when a child is triggered is helping them feel safe and regulated. After they regulate, then you can have a discussion.

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# “What do I do?”

## Trauma-Informed Support for Children

### 1 Create safety

If the child is overwhelmed, perhaps guide them to a quiet corner or allow them to decompress by visiting the restroom. If you are in a classroom, maybe you have a peace corner that you've outfitted with blankets or a screen so that it feels like a safe place.

### 2 Regulate the nervous system

Stress brings a predictable pattern of physiological responses and anyone who has suffered toxic stress or trauma is going to be quickly stressed into hyperarousal (explosive, jittery, irritable) or hypoarousal (depressed, withdrawn, zombie-like). No matter how ingenious our regulation strategies, how artsy-crafty we get with tools, the child has to find what works for them.

### 3 Build a connected relationship

This is the number one way to regulate the nervous system. When we are around people we care about, our bodies produce oxytocin, which is the hormone responsible for calming our nervous system after stress. If we stay connected, then eventually the calm discussion of each person's feelings and needs can take place.

### 4 Support development of coherent narrative

Creating predictability through structure, routines and the presence of reliable adults helps reduce the chaos a child may feel and allows them to start creating the kind of logical sequential connections that not only help them understand their own narrative, but are also the fundamental requirement of many types of learning.

### 5 Practice 'power-with' strategies

One of the hallmarks of trauma is a loss of power and control. When someone is wielding power over you with no regard to your thoughts or feelings, the toxic shame of the original trauma may come flooding back. As adults, we should use our power well. If we model a 'power-with' relationship with children it's our best chance of creating adults who will treat others with dignity and respect.

### 6 Build social emotional and resiliency skills

Trauma robs us of time spent developing social and emotional skills. The brain is too occupied with survival to devote much of its energy to learning how to build relationships and it's a good chance we didn't see those skills modeled for us. Learning to care for one another is the most important job we have growing up.

### 7 Foster post-traumatic growth

We know that there are qualities and skills that allow people to overcome the most devastating trauma and not just survive but find new purpose and meaning in their lives. Problem solving, planning, maintaining focus despite discomfort, self-control and seeking support are all known to lead to post-traumatic growth and are skills we can foster in children.

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There are three stages in trauma recovery.

1. **Safety and stabilization:** this stage is focused on literal safety. This also includes managing painful memories, emotions, body sensations and relationships with others.

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2. **Processing:** this stage involves telling the trauma story, reclaiming and transforming traumatic memories so they can be integrated into one's life story. It is important to note it is not your duty to ask about the trauma story or try to get your child to talk about it -this can be retraumatizing if the child is not ready. A trauma-informed counselor is highly recommended. Your child may share details in small doses or bigger doses. You simply have to listen and comfort.
  3. **Integration and post-traumatic growth:** this stage focuses on developing a new sense of self and creating a new future. Again, this may happen naturally and guidance of a trauma informed counselor can be helpful as well (and is highly recommended).

One more thing to note: healing is not always linear. A child can be in stage 3, and experience a trigger where their focus may return to stage 1 until they feel safe again.

The following section focuses on tips and tools you can integrate into your home, yourself, and use with your child.

## **Tips and Tools**

In this section we will discuss different tips and tools to keep in mind.

- Be patient and consistent -do not take their behavior personally.
- Routine is safety for children. Develop a routine. Consistent bedtime every night, consistent wake up time, eat dinner around the same time every night, read, relax, etc before bed. Develop a routine that works best for you and the family in the household. This will bring a sense of safety the child can rely on.
- Set clear boundaries and rules... and stick to them! This involves clear consequences that "fit the crime." For example, no TV for a year when a child has lied may not be the best approach and may even encourage future lying to avoid such drastic punishment. Sometimes with a lie, the best approach is discussing it. If a child says they are at one place and ended up sneaking off, an appropriate punishment would be staying home or they can only be with their friends when you are around until they can earn your trust again.
- Do not expect to learn upfront about all of the trauma the child has experienced. Some of the effects may not become apparent for months or years. Like in the

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ReMoved video, the foster mother did not know gifting her a dress would be triggering.

- Be prepared to have patience and talk through things.... A LOT! Children are learning to navigate the world. When what they have learned was not the best, they will need to relearn. And they will need to understand why these rules exist. You are their guide.
- Be open to problem solving in new ways. This can look like developing a token economy or rewards system to help improve wanted behavior, using night lights, allowing a food storage container in their bedroom, etc.
- Continue to learn about trauma and its effects. Not all cases are textbook and doing your research can help.
- Never be afraid to reach out for support and help. Utilize and seek out community resources in your area. The internet can also be a great place to find support groups and resources.
- Take the long view and try to see the bigger picture. Trauma didn't happen overnight. Healing won't either.
- Use positive reinforcement -your love is not conditional. When you see your child displaying healthy behaviors, being kind, etc tell them! Recognize them for their strengths. Brag on them. Love them. They need it. Positive reinforcement goes further than negative reinforcement. We all want to be seen and recognized for the good we do and that exists within us. Be their mirror.
- Remember you are the child's advocate. If they need something, tell their case worker -who may need reminding several times. Case workers have a hard job and a heavy load (so be sure to thank them for the work they do!). Continue to follow up with them if your child needs counseling, mentorship, life skills, financial literacy, etc.
- Understand this: children are resilient, amazing, and strong.

### **Tips and tool for when things feel out of control**

- First, be aware of your reaction. How are you feeling? If you are escalated, it will be difficult to de-escalate the child. Take a moment to recenter yourself and breathe.
- Speak calmly and validate: "I can tell this is upsetting right now. I want to talk through this and it's hard when things feel so intense right now."



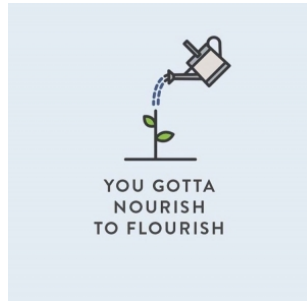
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- You may need to take a break or let the storm ride out. When it is calm, then address the issue.
  - Ex: I know you were upset and I want to talk to you about this. I understand you are angry and that is okay. It is not okay to yell/hit/insult. These are the rules and here is why we have these rules....”
  - It can be helpful to ask what they need. Do they need a hug? A second in their room? Some water?
  - Pro-tip: when a child is crying, offer them some water. A child cannot cry and drink water at the same time. This helps them breathe and recenter. I usually say to the young ones, “Drink the water. It will help, trust me.” Or “Drink some water before all your tears run out.” To an older child, simply giving them water and telling them to take a second will help. Things like water and food are basic survival instincts, this will help with a sense of safety.

Remember - these children come from different backgrounds. They may not have had the proper guide in the past and will need to learn and relearn healthy ways to interact. Using words like, “Because I said so” isn’t going to be helpful. Threats and hinting or saying a child cannot stay if they act a certain way is triggering. This also teaches them that love is conditional on their behavior and they already are dealing with a sense of rejection from their parents. They need to understand why -teach them. It is okay to have big emotions -adults have them too, do we not? We are less than perfect and we cannot expect children to be. Helping them understand healthier ways to communicate and deal with these emotions is going to be beneficial. And finally...

## **You can’t pour from an empty cup**

Self-care is important! If you are stressed, frustrated, and at your wits end, it is going to be hard to give your best to those you love and those who need your love, like the foster child/children in your home. Make sure you are getting adequate sleep, eating a balanced diet, drinking water and taking care of yourself in the most basic of ways. This is also your permission slip to seek counseling, exercise, get a massage, have a night out with your friends, have a date night, etc. Time for yourself is not selfish and helps you be the best you you can be.

In case you needed more excuses to take care of yourself, self-care has many benefits. Acts of self-care relieve stress and boosts the immune system. It improves mental well-being, helps to improve self-compassion, increases productivity, improves physical health and.... Improves your capacity to care for others.



## Helpful resources

You have infinite knowledge at your fingertips. Any time you are struggling with something, Google it! "Trauma informed parenting," "Foster parent support groups," "How to bond with a child who has reactive attachment disorder," "how to integrate foster children into the family." Seriously... use it! Use it to connect, use it to research, use it to help yourself and the child in your home. Below are some helpful resources and good places to begin.

Websites	Podcasts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fosterparents.com</li> <li>● Traumainformedcare.chcs.org</li> <li>● Childwelfare.gov (search "Foster parent")</li> <li>● Pinterest (so many helpful ideas on parenting!)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Forgotten Podcast</li> <li>● Fostering Voices</li> <li>● Foster Parenting Podcast</li> </ul>

\*If you are on your phone or tablet and cannot see the entire table, you should be able to scroll left or right to see more.

## Conclusion

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Being a foster parent is HARD. I get it. I want to say that I see you. I know how hard it can be. You are strong, and tough and have a big heart. No one is expecting you to be perfect. And we are oh-so-thankful for you. I am sure it has turned out to be tougher than you thought. You can do this. The child/children in your home deserves so much love and care. I hope this resource guide has given you a better understanding and some ideas on what you can use moving forward. Please feel free to share this with other foster parents or your caseworker to distribute. Also, keep in touch with me and visit my website - I have free resources available and actively update it as much as I can. [www.stillwaterstherapy.org](http://www.stillwaterstherapy.org)