

Fostering Forward

A monthly tip sheet to navigate through foster care

All of the children we care for within the foster care system have experienced trauma in some way. The best way for us to help them overcome this trauma is to truly understand what trauma is and how it affects our children's brains and bodies.



Understanding Trauma

Trauma

NOUN

1. A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.
2. Emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to long-term neurosis.

Did you know? Trauma originates from the 17th Century Greek word meaning *WOUND*.

What is Trauma?

Trauma can be a one-time experience or ongoing experiences that negatively affect our brains, our bodies, our way of thinking, and our sense of security. Trauma can include things that **DO** happen to us such as abuse or being involved in a severe accident, things that **DON'T** happen to us such as experiencing neglect and not having our basic needs met, or it can include things we have **WITNESSED** such as domestic violence, death or serious injury of a loved one, or a significant natural disaster.

How does trauma affect us?

Trauma affects people in many ways. Here are some ways that trauma can affect the way our brains and bodies respond to the world around us:

- Cognitively—Experiencing trauma can affect our ability to process our thoughts and make good judgments, sometimes leading to poor or impulsive decisions
- Emotionally—Trauma may enhance feelings of shame, fear, guilt, anger, or pain, causing us to feel these emotions more intensely and more frequently
- Physically—Significant trauma can affect our muscle growth, joints, digestion, metabolism, body temperature, sleep, immune system, and many other bodily functions
- Spiritually—Trauma can affect the way we see the world around us and our understanding of life, distorting our worldview to appear as though everything is unsafe
- Socially—Interpersonal relationships with friends, family, co-workers, etc., are also significantly affected by trauma due to our heightened sense of awareness, cautiousness, and mistrust

What do the effects of trauma look like?

- Difficulty trusting others
- Verbal or physical aggression
- Trouble at school or with peers
- Feeling consistently sad
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Spacing out
- Struggles to sort through feelings
- Not feeling as though they have their own identity
- Feeling consistently worried or scared
- Need for extra attention or extra clingy
- Need for constant approval from others
- Flashbacks to the traumatic event(s)
- Academic or educational difficulties

Is there a relationship between trauma and mental health?

YES! There is a significant relationship between trauma and a child's mental health! Severe ongoing trauma can lead to the following mental health diagnoses for a child:

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Substance Abuse, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), or Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD).

How can you help a child overcome their trauma?

- Reassure your child that they are safe and that whatever happened to inflict trauma was not their fault.
- Recognize and try to avoid triggers that may arise from social media, TV or movies, the radio, or from family or friends who are not aware of the past traumatic experience.
- Provide your child with opportunities to talk about what happened, but don't pressure them to discuss the event(s) if they are not ready.
- If the child asks you questions about the traumatic experience or their current situation, be honest; and remember it's okay to say you don't know the answer.
- Help your child get involved in physical activity such as a sport they enjoy, and encourage a healthy diet.



- Create routines to establish structure, consistency, and predictability.
- Follow through with things you say you are going to do.
- Incorporate therapy and other therapeutic services when necessary.

Sources: Psychology Today, Oxford English Dictionary, ARC Framework, and HelpGuide.