



## CAREGIVERS INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMATIC STRESS AND *REAL LIFE HEROES*

### ***What is traumatic stress?***

Children (and adults) can develop symptoms of traumatic stress when they experience events that threaten, or appear to threaten, severe harm or death and when a child or adult lacks the ability and supportive relationships to manage these threats. Experiences of natural disasters, deaths, severe illnesses, violence in the child's home or neighborhood, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and neglect can all lead to traumatic stress reactions.

When a child feels their lives and the lives of those they love are no longer safe, the child may develop long-lasting changes in how they think, feel, or respond with their bodies. Children's heart rates may increase and they may begin to sweat, become agitated, feel tense, feel aches or pains or 'butterflies in their stomachs,' and become hyper alert. After a traumatic event, children may watch and listen vigilantly for signs that scary or dangerous things could happen again. Children may become emotionally upset with little warning and for reasons that are not noticed by other children or adults. They may also react by withdrawing, isolating, running away, getting into fights, or angrily lashing out at other children or adults.

Traumatic stress reactions are often very distressing, but, in fact, these reactions are also very normal. These are ways our bodies protect us and prepare us to survive dangers. However, children who have experienced traumatic events may develop longer-lasting reactions that interfere with their physical and emotional health, especially if they have experienced multiple traumas that were unpredictable or disrupted children's relationships and security with caregivers. Children cannot learn or develop important social skills when they are always on the look-out for danger and when their bodies are ready to react quickly to any perception of risk for the child, family members, or other people the child loves. Attention and memory problems are common reactions along with difficulty making plans or solving problems. Children with traumatic stress may fall behind in school and lack the ability to manage common requests by caregivers, teachers, or others in the community leading to increased conflicts. Symptoms often include intense and ongoing emotional upset and agitation, chronic anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties maintaining attention, school problems, nightmares, physical symptoms such as difficulty sleeping and eating, or symptoms of depression.

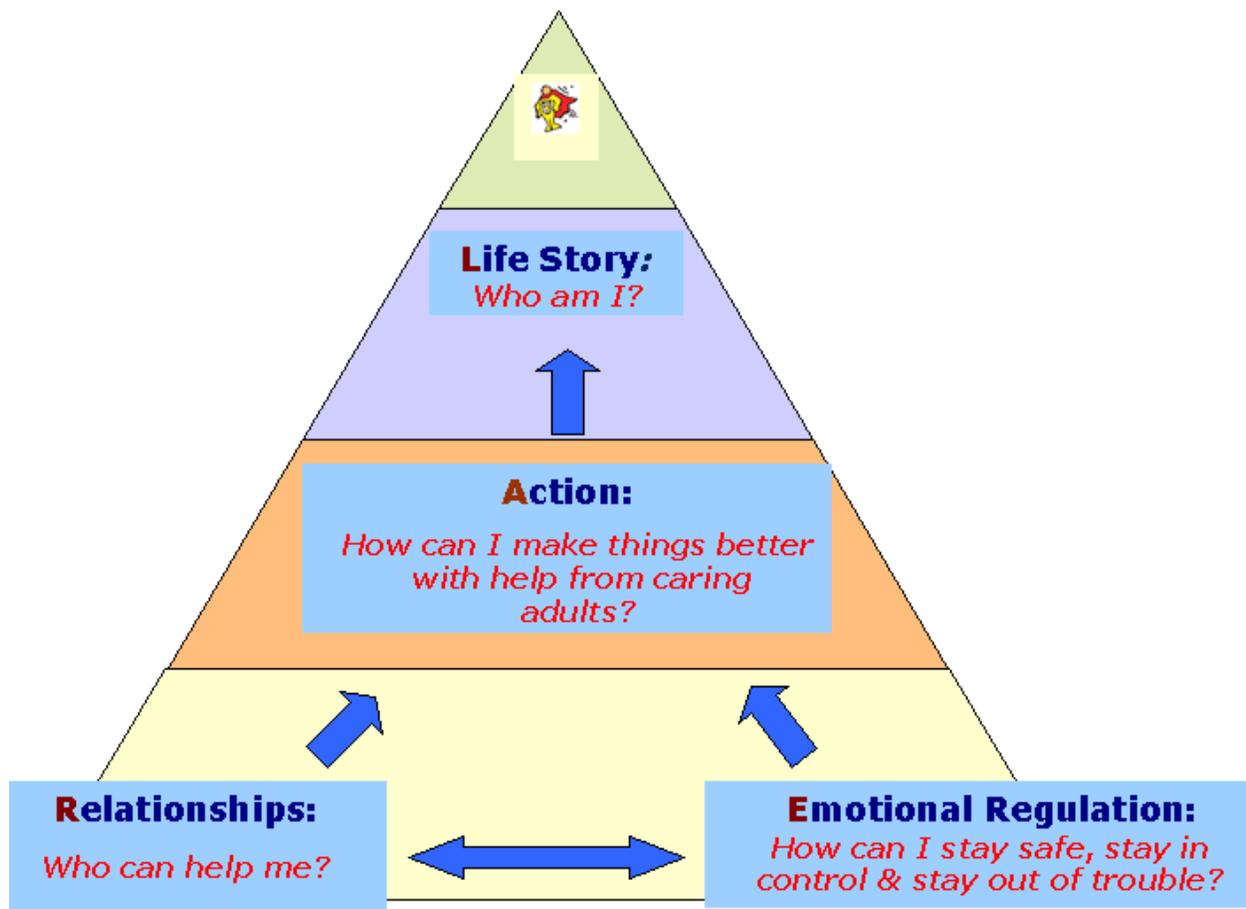
Traumatic stress may appear in different ways with different children. Reactions are often related to the child's age, ability to understand, ability to cope, and feelings of security in their relationships with caregivers at the time that traumatic events occurred. One child in a family may react much more strongly than another child, often depending on their ability to cope and the support they experience during and after traumatic events. The good news is that treatments have been developed that can help children and their families who are suffering from traumatic stress.

### ***What is Real Life Heroes?***

*Real Life Heroes* uses a workbook and creative arts activities to help children and caregivers rebuild safety, caring and resilience after experiences of traumatic stress. Workbook activities help children build the skills and security needed to foster healing, recovery, and the strength to overcome hardships. Children learn about what makes a hero including learning skills to solve problems, getting help, and helping others. Learning about heroes includes learning about strengths and

stories of how family members and people with the child's ethnic heritage have experienced and overcome hard times. Then, with these stories of caring and overcoming, children are encouraged to develop their own skills to succeed with help from caregivers.

In each session, children learn to recognize clues in their own bodies and how to share these safely with practitioners and caregivers. Sessions include sharing feelings on thermometers for stress, self-control, and feeling mad, sad, glad, and safe. Magic and calming activities engage children to learn and practice skills. Workbook pages help children share experiences and develop coping skills with rhythm, music, and movement. Therapists help children take their drawings and make them into short stories with a beginning, middle, and an end so that children learn they can *move through* both good times, and later hard times, and make things better in their lives instead of feeling trapped. Every session helps children: (1.) build stronger relationships, (2.) develop greater abilities to understand and manage feelings, (3.) find and practice ways to cope with problems, and, (4.) overcome feelings of shame or distress and feel good about themselves.



Chapter by Chapter, children work with caregivers and therapists to change cycles of behaviors that led to problems. Step by step activities help children grow stronger than their fears and to change old ways of coping that got them into more trouble. The workbook helps children change how they see themselves from feeling hurt, unwanted, unlikeable, damaged, or hopeless, to feeling that they

can work through the traumas of the past to experiences of safety with caring adults committed to helping children grow and develop into adulthood.

## What's inside each chapter?

### Chapter One: *Affect Power; Recognizing and Expressing Feelings*

- ❖ Children (and caregivers) begin to use workbook pages to develop drawings into 'Three-Chapter' stories with a beginning, middle, and an end, and to enrich stories with feelings expressed through rhythm, music, and movement.
- ❖ Chapter pages encourage children to develop skills and safety to recognize a range of feelings, express feelings appropriately, and change how they feel so they can remain safe.

### Chapter Two: *Finding and Strengthening Heroes*

- ❖ Children identify heroes they see in media, popular culture, politics, their cultural heritage, and their family and learn what helps their heroes succeed including how heroes get help and help others.
- ❖ Workbook pages encourage children and caregivers to share stories of overcoming 'tough times' by family members and highlight the importance of caregivers for helping children learn essential skills and developing courage.
- ❖ Children develop *Youth Power Plans*, strength-based worksheets, that focus on helping children share what helps them cope, what doesn't help, and developing a shared safety plan with caring adults to prevent or reduce traumatic stress reactions.
- ❖ Caregivers are also encouraged to develop *Caregiver Power Plans* that identify their child's triggers, reactions, and interventions that can prevent or reduce traumatic stress reactions.

### Chapter Three: *Caring Adults from the Past; Guardians for the Future*

- ❖ Children and caregivers work together as detectives to learn about who helped children in the past and to record memories of caring.
- ❖ Children's skills and talents are linked with achievement of parents, grandparents, other relatives, and stories of overcoming that are part of the child's cultural heritage.

### Chapter Four: *Good Times: Bonding with Allies and Mentors*

- ❖ Children (and caregivers) explore a broad range of people in their lives and identify mentors, protectors, and emotionally supportive relationships.
- ❖ Memories of support are strengthened to expand the child's sense of security and confidence.

### Chapter Five: *Developing the Hero Inside (and Outside)*

- ❖ Children develop resources within themselves and with the help of supportive adults to calm down through slow breathing, reminders of caring, comforting images, and movement.
- ❖ Activities strengthen skills for self-regulation by developing the child's ability to become aware of signals in their body, how feelings and thoughts can come and go, how the child can re-direct attention, and open up possibilities for making things better.
- ❖ Children develop skills that help them accept and move through fears and negative thoughts and try out new behaviors to solve problems.
- ❖ Children increase development of skills to manage situations that can often trigger traumatic stress reactions including how to stay safe in relationships, develop positive friendships, and learn from teachers, coaches, clergy and other safe and supportive adults.

### Chapter Six: *The ABC's of Trauma and the Hero's Challenge*

- ❖ Worksheet questions help children recognize how stress works in the body and mind and how changing beliefs about themselves can help the children achieve their goals and make things better for themselves and their families.

- ❖ Children are invited to become the directors of their own 'life' movies as a way to engage them to take control of what happens when they are triggered with reminders that have, in the past, led to problem behaviors.
- ❖ Activities include breaking apart what happens leading to distress and getting into trouble and how the child can become a 'thought-shifter to Succeed.'
- ❖ Working on this chapter with supportive caregivers helps children feel safe enough to share how they felt and acted in the past and feel safe again with caring adults committed to protecting and guiding the child to maturity.

### **Chapter Seven: Timelines and Moves**

- ❖ A roadmap and timeline help children remember important people and places from the past and to organize what happened in their lives by the years of their lives, from birth to the present time.
- ❖ Chapter pages encourage children to share how they remember places where they lived, the people who cared for them, how they felt in each place, and how the child experienced and understands what led to the child moving to a new home now that they are older (and wiser).
- ❖ Chapter Seven helps caregivers and practitioners understand the child's experiences (feelings and beliefs) and develop a list of traumatic events to help the child re-integrate traumatic experiences with a renewed sense of safety as part of work on desensitization.

### **Chapter Eight: Through the Tough Times**

- ❖ Workbook pages help children and emotionally supportive caregivers to safely share what they experienced, what was most difficult, and what they learned can make things better.
- ❖ Movies and 'three-chapter' stories help children share traumatic experiences stressing how the child and supportive adults have developed skills and supports so they can escape feeling trapped in recurrent traumatic experiences.
- ❖ Activities encourage use of evidence-supported desensitization techniques to help children share undisclosed details and *move through* traumatic memories to places and times where they felt safe and cared for.
- ❖ Children are encouraged to share experiences of loss and also shame for what they feel they have done wrong and to find ways to feel good about themselves again.
- ❖ Before completing Chapter Eight, practitioners and caregivers help children practice 'moving through' their worst memories so that reminders of what happened and other hard times will not lead to traumatic stress reactions.

### **Chapter Nine: Into the Future**

- ❖ Workbook pages encourage the child to broaden their sense of time by sharing how they see themselves developing skills and relationships through adolescence and into adulthood.
- ❖ Activities encourage children to share who they would see as important in their lives and provide opportunities for practitioners and caregivers to build or strengthen positive, supportive relationships with family members, mentors, and other supportive adults.
- ❖ Children are invited to share what they have learned and how they would help other children who experienced similar 'tough times' as the child did, building the child's sense of themselves as a hero.

### **'My Story': My Words, My Photos**

- ❖ 'My Story' provides an opportunity for the child to integrate what they have learned into a life story of overcoming shared in words with photos, drawings, or video.
- ❖ Children are then urged to rip off the *Real Life Heroes* cover page and substitute their own book cover and dedication to make this book truly their own.

### **How does Real Life Heroes work?**

**Real Life Heroes** helps children develop hope, skills, and confidence with the support of caring adults. The *Life Storybook* highlights each child's and family's strengths including their spiritual and cultural heritage and provides activities that practitioners and caregivers can use to help each child grow strong enough to change problems. Each

chapter develops skills and relationships needed for the next chapter leading up to helping the child reduce traumatic stress reactions. The model works like a pyramid for growth, step by step, chapter by chapter.



*Chapter by Chapter, Stronger and Stronger*

**Real Life Heroes** is listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices ([http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM\\_ID=226](http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?PROGRAM_ID=226)) by the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the SAMHSA National Center for Trauma-Informed Care manual "Models for Developing Trauma-Informed Behavioral Health Systems and Trauma-Specific Services," and as an Evidence-supported and Promising Practice by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; [http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/promising\\_practices/RLH\\_General.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/promising_practices/RLH_General.pdf)).