

Walking on Eggshells:

Recognizing and Responding to Trauma Triggers

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Trauma

The word "Trauma" is a Greek word meaning:

"a wound, a hurt, a defeat"

Trauma occurs when an individual's perception of events is processed as threatening coupled with helplessness



Trauma

- Trauma is an emotional wound resulting from a shocking event or multiple and repeated life threatening and/or extremely frightening experiences that may cause lasting negative effects in a person, disrupting healthy physical, emotional and intellectual development.



Types of Trauma Experienced by Children and Youth in out-of-home care

- May be a single event, repeated or chronic:
- Neglect and Abuse—physical, sexual, emotional
- Witnessing Domestic Violence
- Multiple Placements and rejection—repeating the sense of traumatic loss
- All of the above involve unstable caretaking and disruption of primary attachments

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Stress Response System

Dramatic, rapid, unpredictable or threatening changes in the environment activate the stress response system. If these events are prolonged, chronic or severe, the child's brain stays in this survival mode

During childhood when the brain is still developing, traumatic events can result in changes to the brain so that the child is in a permanent state of arousal even when there is no threat



Trauma Causes Dysregulation

“Severe trauma causes a cascade of mental and physical problems in every part of the body and brain”

Dr. Bruce Perry, MD



Trauma...The Body Keeps Score

The body stores all traumatic events and memories—the body keeps score and you become a terrified organism. Your immune system changes, your stress hormone system changes and your perception of your body changes.



No “Cure” for Trauma

- There is no cure for trauma—once it enters the body, it stays forever.....
- Trauma marks the end of a life chapter, and the beginning of a new chapter



A youth with a complex trauma history:

- May have trouble developing skills and learning due to the amount of mental energy spent reacting to trauma triggers
- May have trouble focusing and processing information
- May seem distracted because he is trying to predict or avoid the next “bad thing” that will happen
- May have a “hair trigger” response—flooded by overwhelming and unbearable emotions
- May shut down and be unable to express emotion¹⁰

We all have baggage but...

We all have some emotional baggage, but some of our children are driving a U-Haul



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What is a Trauma Trigger?

A trigger is a reminder of past traumatic events.



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Trauma Triggers

Traumatic triggers come in many forms. Many things can be a possible trigger for someone, often things that seem ordinary.



What Happens When a Trigger is Present

The trauma trigger sends a warning signal to the brain: Look out! Danger is present!

Even if no actual threat exists, the brain's perception of threat is very real.

The child immediately shifts into survival mode, prepared to fight, flee, or freeze as self-protection

Express Train Activated!

The Express Train goes straight from "Observe" to "React."

The Express Train bypasses all local stops:

- Interpret
- Process
- Reason
- Logical Thought
- Planning



What Does This Look Like?

- Sudden tantrum, yelling, aggression, seemingly “out of the blue”
- Defiance, refusal to follow rules
- “Ignoring,” refusing to answer questions
- Adamant but inexplicable dislike or avoidance of certain people/places/events
- Dramatic expressions of despair, suicidal ideation, self-harm
- Running away
- Severe anxiety or panic attack
- Drug or alcohol use

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It Can Seem Like...

- This kid is completely unpredictable! He gets mad over the littlest thing!
- This kid is such a drama queen; she acts like she’s dying when the situation isn’t that serious.
- This kid must be mentally ill; his behavior makes no sense at all.
- This kid is just manipulative; she always wants everything her way & won’t follow any rules!
- This kid is so disrespectful! He ignores me when I’m speaking to him, and won’t even respond to simple questions.

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And it Can Feel Like...

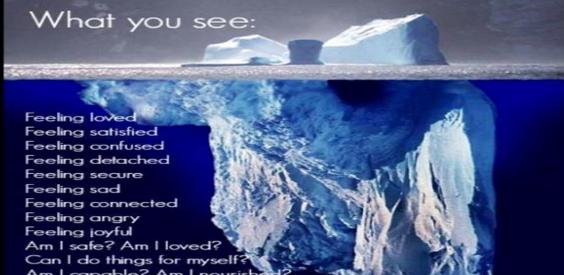
We are constantly walking on eggshells in our house, always worried about when our child is going to “go off” next!



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A Child's Behavior is an Iceberg

What you see:



Feeling loved
 Feeling satisfied
 Feeling confused
 Feeling detached
 Feeling secure
 Feeling sad
 Feeling connected
 Feeling angry
 Feeling joyful
 Am I safe? Am I loved?
 Can I do things for myself?
 Am I capable? Am I nourished?
 Do I belong? Am I respected? Do I
 have power? Am I secure? Am I included?
 Are my thoughts valued? Am I understood? Do I matter?

(What's really going on)

www.JodyBartlett.net

What happens when a person is triggered?

- Individual may suddenly feel uneasy, afraid, anxious, tense, or panicked by the triggering event, which has reawakened the old traumatic experience



What Does it Feel Like for the Child?

Remember, the brain believes the danger is real!

The body is flooded with chemicals to allow for successful self-defense: fight, flight, or freeze.

Heart may be pounding, muscles tensing, breathing rapid.

What does this feel like? FEAR!

More mild responses, where child feels irritable, angry, anxious, uncomfortable and isn't even sure why, can also occur.



So How Can We Help?

Step 1:

Try to identify the trigger and, if possible, remove or mitigate it.

Ex: Child is triggered by the sound of a couple arguing on the street outside the home. Close the window, put on some music, move to a room where it is not so loud.

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What is the Trigger?

Sometimes triggers are very obvious. Your child, or you, can easily identify them.

However, they can also be very subtle, and difficult to identify. Sometimes, your child will not even know what triggered him/her.



Examples of Triggers

- Large men
- Yelling, whispering
- People standing too close
- Criticism, put-downs
- Time of year, anniversary dates
- Packing suitcases
- Intoxicated people
- Sexual situations or stimuli
- Interactions with an authority figure



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Be A Detective!

- What sights/sounds/smells were present?
- What time of day is it? What time of year is it? Is it the anniversary of a particular event in your child's life? (Traumatic event, first removal from home, date of TPR, etc.)
- Who was around?
- What was happening?

Consider keeping a log to help identify patterns that can offer clues to triggers.

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Can we eliminate Trauma Triggers?

Once we become aware of triggers, we might feel an impulse to get rid of them. That may be reasonable in some cases; we can try to create a calm environment in the home, free of violent imagery or speech, or other distressing sights, sounds, smells.

BUT there will always be trauma triggers that we cannot anticipate and cannot avoid.

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So How Can We Help?

Step 2:

Ensure immediate safety

Ex: A child with a history of self-harming behaviors has become triggered, and is now in the bathroom with the door closed. You know there are medications and razor blades in there. First priority is to get to the child and ensure he does not hurt himself.

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So How Can We Help?

Step 3:

Help the child return to a regulated state. This may involve speaking soothingly, reminding the child he is safe, helping him distinguish between past events and present events.

Ex: A child is triggered by seeing someone who reminds them of their abuser in some way (appearance, voice, etc). Using a soft, soothing tone, calmly point out that this is a different person, that you are going to keep the child safe, that you will stay near them and not allow anything bad to happen to them.

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Listen to words and watch behaviors

- Some children can tell you what they are experiencing, but others won't want to talk about it, won't know what they are feeling, or can't express it in words.
- "Listen" to what the child is showing and telling you in words, behaviors or physical complaints like headaches or stomach aches.



Responding to Needs

Rather than reacting to the child's problems, we need to respond to the child's needs



So How Can We Help?

Step 4:

Help child learn to anticipate and plan for triggers in their environment.

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Anticipating Triggers

If the trigger is unavoidable, plan ahead!

I know the anniversary of your mom's death is coming up. This is always a tough time of year for you.

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Anticipating Triggers

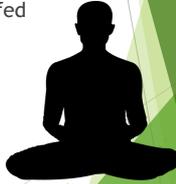
Talk with your child, at a time that they are calm, about what helps, and what doesn't, when they are triggered.



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Anticipate Triggers

Help your child develop healthy calming techniques and skills, such as deep breathing, listening to a favorite song, meditation, or hugging a special stuffed animal.



Help youth develop positive coping strategies

Coping strategies are individual and specific calming mechanisms to manage and minimize stress—they help a person to self-regulate

Examples: listening to calming music, taking a walk, jogging, journaling

Create an empowering environment to help youth increase self-awareness and develop resiliency skills



Help Youth Learn to Self-Sooth

Self-Soothing

(Comforting yourself through your five senses)

1. Something to touch
(ex: stuffed animal, stress ball)
2. Something to hear
(ex: music, meditation guides)
3. Something to see
(ex: snowglobe, happy pictures)
4. Something to taste
(ex: mints, tea, sour candy)
5. Something to smell
(ex: lotion, candles, perfume)

Could I be Triggering My Child??



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How Trauma-Informed are you?

A trauma-informed approach of Trauma sensitivity is valued

vs.

A "tradition of toughness" is valued as the best approach



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Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment

- We must try to create environments where behavior is anticipated and not reacted to
- Parent response to behavior must be caring, empathetic and calm
- We must ask ourselves questions like:
- "What might we be doing that is triggering our child? What do we need to change in our environment? What are we doing that is not supportive?"

Being Trauma-Informed

Use an individualized, strength-based approach

Strength-based interventions that avoid conflict and violence to ensure safety, to meet needs and to minimize any traumatic event that could hurt the child or parent



How Can We See Beyond Behavior?

Instead of asking:

“What’s wrong with you?”

Ask: “What happened to you?”



Children Assume the Worst

Children with trauma histories always assume the worst...When you ask a child “Please move your shoes out of the living room.” What the child hears is “Can’t you do anything right?”



Trauma Informed Approach

Say "Let's try something else"
vs.
"You know better than that."



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Trauma Informed vs. Not Trauma Informed

- Saying hello and goodbye to youth
- vs.
- Coming in and leaving with no acknowledgement



Trauma Informed Approach

- "May I help you?"
-
- vs.
- "Go back to your room."



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Positive Reframes

Manipulative = Gets Needs Met

Defiant = Courageous

Impulsive = Spontaneous

Bossy = Natural Leader

Attention-seeking = Communicates Needs

Sneaky = Inventive

Sense of Control

- Youth with trauma histories need to feel some sense of control of their lives....



Create an Empowering Environment

- Encourage self-nurturing and self-soothing
- Teach rather than enforce
- Relate to your child as an individual—not behaviors
- Youth see that parents really care
- Youth develop skills they can use to self-regulate



Need to Reinforce:

- Good coping skills
- Role model good coping skills
- Offer ourselves to help
- We need to help the traumatized child build that wedge and understand that not all people are harmful and not all places are unsafe.

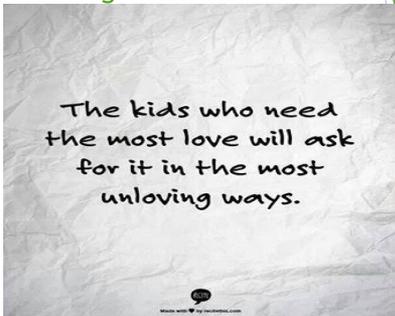


Remember....

- Most youth who have been in foster care have experienced trauma
- Stress worsens trauma symptoms
- Difficult behaviors are sometimes learned coping strategies
- Try to understand the youth's history and support efforts to learn new skills
- Practices that take away a youth's choice and control can be traumatizing
- Keep asking "Is what I am doing respectful and trauma informed?"

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Understanding Trauma...



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Questions?

Comments?
