



Preserving Kinship Connections

# Trauma and Parenting Help



Texas Department of  
**Family and Protective Services**  
*Child Protective Services*





## Why Is Learning About Trauma Important?

Children in Kinship care are placed with family and friends who provide love and care for them in a familiar setting. Even for those who are close to a child, it is not always easy to recognize the signs of trauma.

- When a child is removed from their home, they may be separated from siblings and often are not allowed to bring the familiar things that helped them comfort themselves, such as a pet, a favorite blanket, or stuffed animal. Even when placed with a familiar caregiver, they are still missing many of the things that they relied upon to feel secure.
- Many children in CPS care also experienced trauma in the homes they were removed from.
- Losing loved ones and comfort items, that helped them feel safe, creates an added trauma on top of any abuse or neglect they experienced.
- Children need patience and understanding from trusted caregivers, often for quite a long time before they can heal from all of these traumas.



## Why Is Learning About Trauma Important?

Children and teens thrive when their families have routines, structure, reasonable expectations and their caregivers are nurturing.

- However, many children enter foster or kinship care without a recent history of a safe stable home, and previous trauma coupled with the emotional distress of removal from all that is familiar to them is emotionally traumatizing.
- This is combined by the ongoing separation, losses, and doubt that are a part of the foster care system. The transitions, adjustments, and uncertainty of foster care not only place a great strain on children and teens, but also on kinship caregivers, their family members, and birth parents.
- Kinship caregivers have a lot of power to heal the grief and loss experienced by the children in their care.

***Traumatized people chronically  
feel unsafe inside their bodies.  
The past is alive in the form of  
gnawing interior discomfort.***

- Bessel van der Kolk  
*The Body Keeps the Score*





## Causes of Traumatic Stress

### **Trauma can result from:**

- a single moment in time when the child fears for their own safety, the safety of a loved one, or has witnessed a frightening event
- continuous stress – stressors that may be smaller but are ongoing
- the child’s basic needs not being met by their caregivers

### **Circumstances that may trigger a child’s chronic stress may include:**

- witnessing domestic violence
- repeatedly experiencing physical or emotional abuse
- a single incident of abuse, such as sexual assault
- having a parent whose substance abuse affects their ability to care for the child
- poverty and not having the child’s basic needs met
- a caregiver suddenly being taken away
- multiple placements
- experiencing multiple stressors increases the likelihood of ongoing stress



## Traumatic Stress and Children

- Trauma can create feelings of fear, panic, shock, loss of control, helplessness or hopelessness.
- Effects of stress stack up in the child's body and brain, making it harder over time for them to cope with stress.
- Every traumatic event leaves the child less able to cope over time.
- The effects may be obvious immediately, but can also show up as "misbehavior," months and even years later. This can be confusing for caregivers and makes it more difficult for them to recognize the misbehavior as the child having a hard time coping with trauma.
- Traumatic stress may make it harder to trust other people. The child may also withdraw, confused about whether they can trust their own feelings and control their own reactions from sadness and anger.
  - Normal fight, flight, or freeze responses can make them feel that they are out of control and do not know how to just behave like other kids.



## Traumatic Stress and Children

Children and infants can experience lasting effects of trauma they don't consciously remember.

Stress that the mother experienced while she was pregnant can create chemical changes in the child's body. These changes continue to affect the child's physical and mental state long after the child is born.





## Examples of Childhood Trauma

### Example 1:

- When a pregnant woman experiences domestic violence her heart races, her body releases cortisol and other stress hormones, and all her muscles tense up. Her muscles, bones or other vital organs may be injured during the assault. This causes her body to release chemicals needed to identify injuries and start the repair processes. Later her body will create these same stress reactions just being near the perpetrator. At the same time the woman's body experiences these changes, if she is pregnant, her child also receives the same mix of chemicals and hormones through the placenta. Exposure to these reactions negatively affects her child's emotional regulation system even before birth.

### Example 2:

- Infants and small children experience trauma if they cry and no one meets their needs when they are hungry, or sleepy, need a diaper change, or just needed comforting.





## Understanding Childhood Trauma

- Children who are victims of trauma experience physical changes to their brains and bodies, making it more difficult for them to cope with:
  - transitions from one activity or situation to another,
  - changes in routines,
  - new experiences,
  - situations that have been a normal part of their lives
- Physical changes to the child's brain and body take time to heal
- The child cannot heal until they feel safe
- Consistent patience and understanding from caregivers are important parts of helping the child feel safe



## Understanding Childhood Trauma

When caregivers understand that unwanted behaviors began with changes to the child's body and brain because of traumatic experiences, they can:

- Work to control their own reactions to the child.
- Help the child learn coping skills to build resilience and self-confidence.
- Develop a trusting relationship with the child. Children need trusted adults.
- Expect a bumpy ride – it is common for the child's behavior to bounce back and forth between improving, then backsliding. This pattern can go on for a long time while the child learns coping skills.

Caregivers *must* understand the importance of therapy for the child:

- Children whose trauma is not treated may develop chemical encoding in their brain and body that will remain with them for life.
- However, children who do get the treatment they need to feel safe and build trust, can and do heal.

## Understanding Childhood Trauma

*Behavior is the language of trauma.  
Children will show you before they  
tell you that they are in distress.*

- Micere Keels

Responsive caregiving is one of the most useful ways to help children who have experienced trauma.

Building a safe space early on during the placement helps the child cope. It is common for a child to become more comfortable in the home and feel safe enough to begin to act out their distress.





# Understanding Childhood Trauma

Avoid labeling the child or their behaviors as good or bad. Recognize them as *symptoms* of trauma the child is trying to overcome.

Caregivers may feel less frustrated by the child's behaviors and unwillingness to trust if they understand those same strategies helped the child survive abuse, neglect, and other trauma.

- It's easier to give the child grace once we realize that the behaviors frustrating us were developed to help the child cope with fear, sadness, and pain. Time, trust, patience, and plenty of grace are all needed to help the child heal.

Children often choose the environment where they feel safest, to act out their confusion and pain

- A "honeymoon," period is common when the child is first placed in the home. During this time, the child seems happy and compliant, so caregivers may be taken by surprise when their behavior changes suddenly. Just when everyone starts to feel comfortable, the child may begin having mood swings, emotional outbursts, less compliance, and other concerning behaviors.



## Building Trust

Children cannot begin to heal without safety and trust.

- Caregivers help build trust with the child by only making promises you are sure you can keep.
- Avoid asking the child about their trauma, but be available if the child wants to talk. This can be very emotional for caregivers. Have a plan to remain calm, compassionate and maintain your own composure while recognizing the child's trauma.
- ***Remember to immediately inform the child's caseworker for additional guidance if the child makes an outcry of abuse.***
- Remind the child that other people's choices are never their fault.
- Build healthy habits and continue cultural traditions that may bring feelings of safety and comfort to the child.
- Learn who the child feels safe with and help them develop a support network.

*A child who has experienced trauma will sometimes show they feel connected to an attachment figure by releasing all their big emotions in their presence.*

*What may appear as disconnection may actually be a sign of trust.*

- J. Milburn





## Expect a Honeymoon Period

After placement, there is often a honeymoon period when children who have experienced trauma hide their emotions, fears, and reactions, until they feel safe with their caregiver. Once they begin to feel safe, the child may revert to coping behaviors they are familiar with. It is common for caregivers to see sudden changes in the children's behaviors.

### **The child may:**

- Have difficulty managing their emotions
- Struggle with impulse control
- Display self-destructive behavior
- Revert to behaviors more typical of younger children
- Display bullying behaviors
- Mask their true emotions or low self-esteem



## Consider the **Child's Capabilities**

Trauma can cause changes to the child's body and brain, preventing them from completely progressing through typical child developmental stages.

A child who looks like a teenager on the outside may have coping skills more like a toddler. Normal emotional development may have stopped at a much younger age if the child's resources were focused on survival. It may take a long time before the child catches up to peers who have not experienced trauma.

Separation from loved ones, untreated trauma, and emotions the child experiences during the CPS case may not be "fixed" just because they are safe now. Intense emotions and frustrating behaviors can last months or even years.



***Children actually need  
loving the most when  
they seem to deserve it  
the least.***

- Unknown





## Consider the **Child's Developmental Level**

Teenagers' trauma reactions may be bigger and more obvious than younger children. Teens may be caught between developmental stages at the same time they insist on making more of their own decisions.

Normal changes in hormones encourage teens to want more independence, but their emotional development and decision-making skills may still need to catch up to their peers.

Teens need practice in making decisions, but their response to trauma may not leave them with the skills to make appropriate decisions.

Remember that a child who seeks negative attention is crying out for attention and care. The children who stress us out the most are often also the ones who need us the most.



## Consider the **Child's Developmental Level**

Acting out behaviors often mask the struggle that teenagers are going through.

- Teens who have experienced trauma may be embarrassed about having less self control than their peers. They may feel like there is something wrong with them.
- Teens may also feel isolated or misunderstood, and alone with their pain. This can lead to anger, anxiety, depression, and feeling helpless.
- Teens may try to hide their pain with alcohol, drugs, inappropriate or excessive sexual exploration; they may over- or under-estimate danger or appear angry or withdrawn.



## Parenting Resource for Developmental Stages

Get Parenting Tips is an excellent resource to understand what children are going through and how to help them.

[GetParentingTips.com](https://www.getparentingtips.com)



***Trauma is a result of an overwhelming sense of danger, powerlessness, and fear. Healing is a result of feeling safe, empowered, and supported.***

- Unknown





## Physical Effects of Trauma

The brains and bodies of children who have experienced trauma share *chemical reactions* and *physical changes* like those of people who have lived through wars.

### **Symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):**

- Having frightening thoughts, nightmares, or night terrors
- Reoccurring thoughts and reliving an incident over and over
- Withdrawing or acting like they don't care, or nothing matters
- Avoiding people or places that trigger them
- Intense reactions to stress, such as: fear, anger, violence, or extreme sadness
- Sleep problems
- Bedwetting



## Physical Effects of Trauma

Ongoing trauma can affect children's ability to concentrate, control their emotions, respond to conflict, develop healthy relationships, and understand social cues.

Trauma physically changes the pathways within the brain that help the child regulate emotions and soothe themselves when upset.

### **Other physical changes may affect:**

- Memory
- Attention
- Language
- Critical thinking skills

## Physical Effects of Trauma

These changes can also affect a child's ability to manage anger and recognize danger, which may lead to unsafe risk-taking behaviors.

Trauma diverts energy the child's body would normally use to meet developmental milestones to deal with stress. The longer the child experiences trauma and the more stressors the child is exposed to, the more the effects pile up, making it harder for the child to catch up developmentally.

However, children can catch up with their peers when they feel safe and receive the help they need to learn how to trust themselves and others.







## What is Expected of Caregivers

Recognize that when a child appears to be misbehaving, it is often because deep down, the child does not feel safe. The same experiences or feelings may result in completely opposite reactions from different children.

### **For example:**

- Emotionless withdrawal, or unstoppable crying and begging for attention
- Lying, or insisting on absolute truth regardless of the effect on others
- Overwhelming fear and refusing to be alone, or acting like they do not want anything to do with a caregiver, sibling or other person they care about
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Running away
- Other effects may include: depression, apathy, excessive sleepiness or inability to sleep regular hours, sexual promiscuity, physical illnesses, suicide attempts, potty training regression



## Action Steps

Let the child know they are your priority, and you will protect them. It is normal to have love and concern for the parents, but the child's safety and emotional health must come first.

Follow through and stick with that even on the hard days.

- Provide structure by offering patience, understanding and kindness as part of setting boundaries for the child.
- Focus on reinforcing the positive behaviors you want to see, instead of punishing negative behaviors.
- Reframe acting out as a way for the child without the skills to ask for what they need, to seek care and connection.
- Get in the habit of offering do-overs when the child messes up.
- Do-overs are a great habit for caregivers too, when we don't manage our own feelings as well as we should.



## Action Steps

- Help the child build skills and learn what they can do to cope with overwhelming feelings, before their emotions are out of their control.
- Allow the child to calm down before asking or trying to teach them what they could have done better. Provide them with ideas about how to make better decisions in the future.
- Work together with the child's caseworker, therapist and other professionals to create structure and role modeling.
- Request or seek out a trauma informed therapist for the child.
- Support the child in building positive relationships.
- Let them know that their opinions and feelings are valid and important, even during the times we are holding them accountable.



## Parenting Tips

- Manage challenging behaviors using patience and healthy boundaries.
- Ensure the child understands the rules. Check in from time to time to be certain the child remembers these expectations. It's ok to tell the child "no."
- Implement natural and logical consequences when necessary.
- Minimize punishments and instead teach the child about planning ahead to manage their emotional reactions; ask what they would like to have been different about their own response.
- Become trauma informed yourself so that you are aware that negative behaviors are often a fear response. Punishment does not "fix" fears, but teaching coping skills does.
- Compliments the child often and consider rewards for positive efforts.
- Expect there will be setbacks; recognize that regressions are normal and there will be many stops and starts in the process of healing.

***Nine times out of ten, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry; it will break your heart.***

- Annette Breaux





## Giving Ourselves Grace

Children can be just like us. When children know better, they do better. Try to allow the child – and yourself – some grace when things are not perfect.

- Many caregivers may be unaware of their own traumas. Caring for a child who has experienced trauma can sometimes trigger unprocessed feelings, memories and responses we do not expect.
- Working to recognize and address your own traumas can help you to regulate your emotions when the child is struggling or acting out. Think about how you typically cope with stress, then develop a plan to manage your own reactions.



## Long-Term Effects of Abuse

The long-term effects of abuse, neglect, and trauma on any one individual can never be known ahead of time.

Depending on each child's own coping strategies and personal resilience, children who grew up in the same household and experienced the same traumas may have very different outcomes.

Small changes in the child's thinking may be hard to see during that hard moments. When caregivers model patience, love and understanding, the child is absorbing information and skills they can use later.

It is very likely that once their body and brain have begun to recover, they will be able to put your example to good use.

***When it feels  
disheartening to learn  
that trauma changes the  
brain, remember that  
healing changes the brain,  
too.***

- @howhumansheal







## Conclusion

Many children develop behaviors that can make life more challenging for them and for their families because of trauma.

The good news is that there is hope! Informed kinship caregivers understand that the child's "misbehaviors," are actually a lack of well-developed coping skills.

Caregivers who use trauma-informed techniques can throw a life preserver to children, helping them heal, teaching them coping skills and reducing the effects of trauma.



# Thank You



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