

The Child Welfare System: A Guide to Trauma for Caregivers

Navigating the child welfare system can be frightening and traumatizing for caregivers and children

Here are 3 things you should know about trauma:

- The definition of trauma: The federal agency, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines individual trauma as an event or circumstance resulting in physical, emotional and/or life-threatening harm. The event or circumstance has lasting adverse effects on the individual's mental, physical, or emotional health, affecting their social and/or spiritual well-being.
- That trauma is not your fault.
- That anyone who experiences trauma deserves safe, supportive relationships.

We created this resource as a guide to help you reflect, re-establish and rebuild healing relationships with your child experiencing trauma as part of their experience in foster care.



Step 1: REFLECT:

- Recognize how traumatic the child welfare system is and how it may affect you, children, young people and families. No matter how big or small the event may seem, you can validate a child's experience by intentionally cultivating an environment for them to reflect on their feelings.

TRY THIS

Pay attention to triggers — things that affect someone's emotional state, often significantly, by causing extreme overwhelm or distress. When it happens, don't be afraid to talk about it. Listen, connect and validate their feelings. Check out the ChildTrauma Academy's "[Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers](#)," which answers frequently asked questions about children and trauma.



Step 2: REESTABLISH:

- **DID YOU KNOW?** "A single exposure to traumatic events may cause jumpiness, intrusive thoughts, interrupted sleep and nightmares, anger and moodiness, and social withdrawal." Have patience in knowing that while your child is navigating the impacts of trauma, they may relate to you and their hobbies, routines, peers and environments differently. Take the time to reestablish a new way to connect.

Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network

TRY THIS

Build new activities like [breathing exercises or relaxation techniques](#) into your routines or when your child may feel disconnected from *their* normal. Supporting their emotional regulation can help them feel safe again to engage in what they enjoy.

- Don't forget to play, which can also relieve the intense anxiety of traumatic events. Try sensory activities like aerobic play outdoors, arts and crafts, or baking and cooking activities.

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Step 3: REBUILD:

- Support rebuilding your child's self-esteem and self-worth. "Shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and a poor self-image are common among children with complex trauma histories." When something traumatic happens to a child, they may believe it has happened because they are bad and deserving of it. To help your child feel safe in their home, they must feel safe in their bodies.
- Foster youth have a hard time feeling that their caregiver relationships or home are things that they can count on. A lack of a sense of safety causes young people to stay in a mode of hypervigilance, or waiting for the other shoe to drop. Explicitly affirm for your child that you are there for them, you enjoy spending time with them, and you look forward to future things you will do together. Never make a promise you cannot keep, and always follow through on promises you make. These steps can go a long way toward helping rebuild a sense of safety for the child in your care.

TRY THIS

Incorporate morning and bedtime affirmations to help heal your child's self-image amid a traumatic experience. In the morning, say, "I am safe." "What happened to me does not define me." At night, say, "I have the support I need to overcome any challenge." "I am powerful."

Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Thank you for taking the time to seek the support you need to care for your child. Here are some tips to support *your* well-being in the process:



Celebrate the wins, no matter how small. Look for signs of healing, resilience and recovery, and remember that the joy is in the journey.



Grow your understanding. Courses like NAMI Basics can serve as resources to grow your awareness and understanding of trauma, mental health and symptoms.



Please don't take your child's challenges personally. You are not failing as a caregiver. Give yourself grace.



Seek support If you're feeling triggered, overwhelmed and afraid. That can include attending support groups, virtual chat rooms or counseling. Remember: You are not alone.



Take care of yourself. Set intentional time to engage in activities that reenergize, strengthen, and support your physical, spiritual and mental health.