

A NOTE TO CARE GIVERS

“One of the critical ingredients that make stressful events tolerable rather than toxic is the presence of supportive adults who create safe environments that help children learn to cope and recover” National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

A CHALLENGE

Children that experience trauma, stress, or abuse or neglect often learn that it is not safe to trust others. They learn that adults are unable or unwilling to keep them safe. They may be fearful of adults, even those who have not harmed them. Children with such feelings and behaviors can be extremely hard to understand. If the child placed in your care has been abused or neglected that child may:

- Have no experience with a caring adult who helped them learn how to calm down.
- Have learned that bad behavior gets attention and good behavior is ignored.
- Have hidden negative beliefs about adults: You are unresponsive. You are unreliable. You are or will be dangerous.
- Have unspoken negative beliefs about themselves: I am worthless. I am always in danger. I am powerless.

These feelings and behaviors can cause a serious threat to your resolve to help this child. They can result in another placement. They can result in another trauma. An important part of effectively dealing with a child's troubling feelings and behaviors is to understand their origins.

A CAREGIVER'S IMPACT ON GROWTH AND LEARNING

Like the other parts of our bodies, our brains develop as we age. Children, in particular, are built to learn. They learn in stages. These stages build upon one another. More importantly, relationships provide the foundation for each stage. So a child's relationship with past caregivers was critical to the child's learning. In short, relationships are and were critical to their brain development. For example:

- **Infants get upset and cry.**
 - If a loving caregiver consistently responds to the child and helps restore them to calm. The child learns, eventually, to calm themselves.
 - What did an infant learn from a caregiver who often responded with frustration or who did not respond at all?
- **Toddlers are beginning to learn emotions and language and they do this by mirroring the behavior of the caregivers in their lives.**
 - An engaged and compassionate caregiver creates an engaged and compassionate toddler.
 - How would this stage of development have been affected by mirroring an impatient or emotionally distant caregiver?
- **Adolescents are starting to actively think and ask questions about their surroundings.**
 - Encouragement and understanding help this stage of development in adolescents.
 - What impact would a caregiver have on independent thought and creativity, if the adolescent's thoughts and questions were always met with annoyance and irritation?
- **Teenagers are just beginning to control impulses and make calculated decisions.**
 - Engaged caregivers who demonstrate an even-temper and who encourage a teen to work through decisions, help this stage of development.
 - How would a teen have been affected by a caregiver who criticized, discouraged, and who responded with anger or even violence?

THE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC STRESS OR TRAUMA

When people feel threatened or unsafe, the body goes into survival mode (fight, flight, or freeze). The body acts to protect itself and chemical and physical changes occur. The “thinking” and “rational” parts of the brain begin to shut down. Heart-rate increases and senses are heightened. If this survival system is activated regularly during childhood, survival mode can become normal mode. This learned condition may be mistaken for a behavioral or mental health disorder.

Imagine being in a jungle surrounded by the sights, smells and sounds of a place full of danger. A snake drops from a tree and coils ready to strike. Would you be calm? *Could* you be? Would you be able to learn math? Could you, in that moment, talk to the snake about why it upsets you? Children that have been repeatedly hurt “learn” that other people pose a threat to them much like we learn that snakes, or other animals, may pose a threat to us.

Like chronic stress, trauma can interrupt brain development. Research suggests that if there is injury at one stage of development, the following stages may not begin on a firm foundation. Gaps develop in the child's ability to learn and control emotions.

Sometimes children who seemingly cannot pay attention to anything, are really just constantly assessing threats. The problem is not inattention; these children are really hyper-attentive, paying attention to *everything*. Often they are this way only because they have learned that they have to be this way to survive. Relearning how to behave can take time.

SOME SOLUTIONS

Don't give up!

You have already taken an important step toward helping this child. Children are resilient. When they are safe and supported, they can heal and thrive!

- By being patient, reliable, consistent and responsive, you can teach a child that adults can care for them and keep them safe
- You can help them learn to cope and recover.
- Recovery takes time. It may take all of the patience you have.
- Educating yourself about the impact abuse and neglect has on children can help you cope with these challenges.
- Telling a child, repeatedly if necessary, they are safe and wanted in your home can be an important part of the healing process.

You may want to get a "tangle toy", or a pinwheel. These are more than just toys. They are tools. They are examples of the many tools that are at your disposal to help the children in your care that have survived trauma. When a child is anxious, upset or having difficulty communicating we have learned that directing their attention toward playing with objects such as this toy, (or with silly putty or playing in a sand box) can be calming and relaxing.

Other simple activities that often *really* work (almost magically) in helping some children to calm down include:

- **Rhythm and repetition:** tossing a ball, rocking, swinging, snapping alternating fingers, music, reading nursery rhymes or Dr. Seuss books, drumming, dancing, or swimming.
- **Breath regulation:** in and out through the nose with an emphasis on the exhale, or blowing bubbles.
- **Calming:** yoga, music, or walking

There is help for the child in your care and there is help for you. Don't give up!

The Iowa Alliance for Drug Endangered Children

The following have resources with information that can help you troubleshoot difficult behavior and support you as you support this child.

The Trauma Informed Care Project	www.traumainformedcareproject.org
National Child Traumatic Stress Network	www.nctsn.org
Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association	www.ifapa.org
Iowa Department of Human Services	www.dhs.state.ia.us/Consumers/Find_Help/MapLocations
Visiting Nurse Services	www.vnsdm.org/resources/CommunityResourceDirectory
United Way 2-1-1	211unitedway.org
Polk County Crisis & Advocacy Services	www.polkcountyiowa.gov
Blank Children's Hospital Regional Child Protection Center	www.blankchildrens.org/child-protection

