



Fostering Across Wisconsin

A publication of the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center
in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

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Focus on Childhood Trauma

This edition of Fostering Across Wisconsin focuses on the impact childhood trauma and the effects on traumatized children and their care providers.

Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center Staff (FCARC)

Mike Heath-Lead Resource Specialist
Southern Wisconsin
1-414-534-8078
mheath@wiadopt.org

Barb Brown Resource Specialist
North/Southeastern Wisconsin
1-920-366-2546
bbrown@st-al.org

Sue Schwab Resource Specialist
Western/Northern Wisconsin
(715) 579-9689
sschwab@pathinc.org

Oriana Carey Manager of Programs
Statewide Oversight
1-414-916-0299
ocarey@wiadopt.org

FCARC Toll Free Number
1-800-947-8074

Understanding the Complexities of Childhood Trauma

Trauma is defined as a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, one that induces an abnormally intense and prolonged stress response. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, trauma can have a powerful impact on the lives of very young children. "Recent studies have demonstrated that traumatic experiences affect the brains, minds, behavior of even very young children, causing similar reactions to those seen in older children and adults."

Many youth in foster care as well as those who have been adopted, have experienced trauma. While experiencing or witnessing physical or sexual abuse is a common source of trauma, the emotional turmoil of being removed from their parental homes is additionally traumatic and stressful.

There may be various responses to traumatic events. Youth who have experienced trauma will often times exhibit behavioral challenges. It is important for foster and adoptive parents to understand the impact of trauma. The effects of trauma can be either short-term in duration or last well into adulthood. Subtle triggers, such as a specific smell, a song, a certain location, or an anniversary of a traumatic event can cause a traumatic reaction.

Not all negative behavior, however, can be directly attributed to a traumatic experience. If you have concerns or suspect that trauma may have previously occurred, share your concerns with the child's social worker or mental health professional for further evaluation and assessment. Even though children may not be able to talk about the trauma, it is important to be aware of its impact.

Childhood trauma is a complex and emotionally charged issue. Fortunately, there are numerous resources available to provide additional guidance, support and insights on how to better understand trauma, how it impacts a child's behavior, how to appropriately respond, and how to provide children with trauma focused therapeutic interventions when necessary.

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Become a Foster Parent.*



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The Impact of Trauma on Children

Many children in foster care have been exposed to significant violence or traumatic events prior to placement. Foster parents are often the first line of help children will have. Where can foster parents begin?

If a foster and adoptive parent has an understanding of the child's trauma and its effect on the child's processing and learning, foster and adoptive parents can be better equipped to support children. It is important to acknowledge that often children in foster care have been a witness to or are victims of a traumatic event. Often these extremely stressful events include abuse, neglect, or domestic violence.

A child's ability to cope with traumatic events and experiences depends upon many different variables such as when the event occurred, how old they were, the frequency and the severity of the maltreatment. The brain development of the child is impaired physically and emotionally. The damage can be lessened if the child has a supportive adult and if the child has a hopeful and positive outlook.

Foster and adoptive parents can learn to recognize some of the physical, emotional, and behavioral characteristics that traumatized children may present while in a foster or adoptive home. Some of the signs of trauma are: lack of concentration, sleep disorders, impulsivity, hyper-arousal, delayed development, difficulty regulating emotions, withdrawal, anxiety, anger, aggression, self absorbed behavior, depression and physical complaints. According to Dr. Bruce Perry, of the Child Trauma Academy, traumatized children often lack the "emotional glue" to maintain healthy relationships based on a history of poor connectedness by caregivers. Not all behavioral concerns however can be attributed to trauma. Therefore, it is important to share concerns with the youths' social worker or mental health professional.

When these symptoms occur, it is possible that the child had a reminder of the traumatic event through their thoughts or experiences. The response of foster and adoptive parents can help soften the effects of trauma on the children with whom they care for. Helpful responses include: providing a consistent daily routine for the child, reassuring by listening, teaching, nurturing, and comforting them and by allowing the child to feel some sense of control by providing them with choices that they can make. Parents need to be organized, calm, and confident in themselves.

Remember that the consequences of trauma are significant and may last into adulthood. It is

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The Importance of Self Care

The physical and emotional toll of taking care of traumatized children can be overwhelming and exhausting to even the most experienced and devoted foster or adoptive parent.

Foster and adoptive parents are susceptible to suffering from secondary traumatic stress as a result of parenting children who have been traumatized. According to Dr. Charles Figley, author of Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder, secondary traumatic stress is “the natural consequent behaviors resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person.”

Knowing that Secondary Stress Disorder can occur, parents need to take the necessary steps to insure that they are taking care of themselves. According to Sherry Benson, foster and adoptive parent from Wisconsin and President of the Wisconsin Foster and Adoption Parent Association (WFAPA), “First you need to take care of yourself because if you can’t take care of yourself, how can you take care of your children.” Knowing when you need a break, and giving yourself permission to take a break, is an important aspect of self care. Actively seeking out respite care and attending foster and adoptive parent trainings, support groups, or associations are important options for your consideration.

Other options include taking time out of your busy day to do something that interests you and recharges you. Gardening, scrapbooking, going for a walk or a bike ride, meeting a friend for coffee or lunch, listening to music, writing in a journal, taking a bubble bath, reading a good book, watching a favorite movie, asking your partner out on a date, exercising, or simply spending a few moments alone, are just a few ideas in which you can take good quality care of yourself.

Resources used for this article:

Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center Tip Sheet on Self Care:

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/310/SelfCare2.pdf>

Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder, by Dr. Charles Figley

Foster Parent Support Resources in Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) is available to help, support, and advocate for the needs of foster and adoptive families in Wisconsin. To find out more about WFAPA, visit their website at: www.wfapa.org.

WFAPA FALL CONFERENCE

October 24-26, 2008

The Waters, Minocqua, WI

For more information about other support groups, associations, and resources available in Wisconsin, contact us at 1-800-947-8074 or your licensing agency.

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Recommended Resources on Childhood Trauma

Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center Library Resources Available:

- Child Trauma Handbook: A Guide to Helping Trauma Exposed Children, by Ricky Greenwaid
- Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder, by Dr. Charles Figley
- Telling Secrets: An Artist's Journey Through Childhood Trauma, by Jane Orleman
- Trauma Through a Child's Eyes: Awakening the Ordinary Miracle of Healing, by Peter Levine and Maggie Kline
- "The Brain: The Effects of Childhood Trauma" (DVD) by Dr. Bruce Perry
- "Understanding Childhood Trauma" (VHS & DVD) by Film Ideas Inc.
- "Legacy of Childhood Trauma: Not Always Who They Seem" (VHS) by Echo Bridge Productions

Helpful Web Resources:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org
- The Child Trauma Academy: www.childtraumaacademy.org
- Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association, Inc.: www.wfapa.org
- Foster Care & Adoption Resource Center Tip Sheet on Self Care: <http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/310/SelfCare2.pdf>

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important for foster and adoptive parents to educate themselves on the symptoms and treatment interventions of as well as seek out trauma informed mental health professionals. By educating yourself about the long-term effects of trauma you can better support and advocate for youth.

Resources used for this article:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services administration "Tips for Talking to children in Trauma, Interventions at home for preschoolers and adolescents"
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/tips/intervention.pdf>.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, The Child Trauma Academy. "Special Consideration for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers at www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/principles_TC.asp.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, The Child Trauma Academy. "Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children: How Abuse and Neglect in Childhood Impact Social and Emotional Development" at <http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/bonding.asp>.

Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov "Long Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect". Child, fact sheet, April 2006

Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center
6682 West Greenfield Avenue, Suite 310
Milwaukee, WI 53214
1-800-947-8074
www.wifostercareandadoption.org

Services Provided:

Resource Library
Phone Support
Networking
Research
Comprehensive Website
Recruitment Tools
Statewide Calendar of Events
Newsletters

Outreach at regional meetings, conferences and events

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