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Trauma-Based Parenting 101

by Kim Waldie, BSW

We hear a lot about trauma these days. Working in the post-adoption world, that personally makes me very happy! It means we are making progress educating families, professionals, and communities to better understand what trauma and loss can do to the brain and how it impacts children long term.

However, adoptive parents may discover a disconnect between the information and the defiant, attachment-challenged child they are staring down at. In those moments, it can be difficult to discern how to apply trauma education to the practical situation in front of you.

Your child-parent situation is unique, so you'll have to build a bridge between all that education and your practical parenting tools and style. Here are a few basic principles to start:

Connect: It's all about relationship! Whatever parenting approach you choose to use, it may be helpful to ask, "Did I leave this interaction with my connection to my child intact?"

If you win the battle but damage the relationship, both you and your child lose. The good news is that it's not too late to fix things if you mess up! Owning your mistakes can work wonders for improving a connection with a skeptical child.

When dealing with attachment issues, it often feels like you are working backward by building a connection and bond before expecting a child to follow all the rules. This doesn't mean chaos or a lack of boundaries! It's important to keep healthy boundaries in place that keep your child (and your family) safe, but it's relationship over task when it comes to parenting kids from trauma. Staying connected while teaching or modeling

the desired behaviors will help sustain long-term changes. A simple example may be a "time-in" rather than a "time-out." When the child needs help regulating, bring them close to you rather than sending them away from you with another lecture.

Also, don't miss out on the power of play when it comes to building connection! Laughter and playful activities help diffuse anger (theirs and yours) and connect us to the people we laugh with. It's easy to get so caught up in negative behaviors or too busy that we forget this important aspect of connecting.

Regulate: If you've endured a child screaming for hours, you understand (and appreciate) the importance of good regulation! Let's face it, many of our children, either through abuse or neglect, have missed the much-needed development that facilitates self-regulation. When parenting your child, they will need your brain and your coaching to help them externally regulate until they slowly but surely develop their own ability to do so. It helps to research fun ways to "practice" self-regulation but work hard not to give them more than they can handle. Ask yourself: What works best to calm your child? Are you fueling or calming their dysregulation with your response? Find ways that cool your child down rather than escalating things!

Demonstrate safety: A child who doesn't feel safe (relationally, emotionally, or physically) will be unable to regulate enough to change their behavior. Safety is talked about over and over in trauma education. What danger does your child perceive that could be behind the behavior? What fears do they have about you, as their caregiver, that may be influencing behavior? If your child has been through multiple placements, they may have many.

"Trauma creates change you don't choose. Healing is about creating change you do choose."

— Michelle Rosenthall

Meet their needs: This is where parental patience and detective work meet! You'll need many hours of observing your child's behavior and patterns to do this well. What need is their negative behavior meeting (e.g., food hoarding = safety)? How can you reassure your child that you will meet their needs consistently? Finding ways to proactively meet their needs before the behavior starts goes a long way. Say "yes" as often as you can. We forget how often we say "no," and it keeps us cycling through unnecessary battles.

Unpack their suitcase: More than just unpacking their physical suitcase when they arrive, you'll need to spend a long time helping them unpack their emotional suitcase (see inset). This is the key to long-term healing versus simply controlling behaviors. Talk openly with them about their emotions, and make space for them to process how the past trauma impacts them today. Remind them that it won't always be this way! I tell my children often, "I'm your biggest fan because I believe in you!"

The invisible suitcase

- Children who have experienced trauma often carry an invisible suitcase full of negative beliefs and expectations about themselves, caregivers, and the world based on their past experiences.
- These negative beliefs and expectations often lead to challenging behaviors, including reenactment behaviors.
- Caregivers can repack the suitcase by providing disconfirming experiences with positive replacement messages, consistency, and calm responses.
- Caregivers also need support.

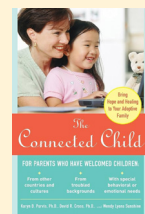
This is just a start. Whatever you do, don't give up! Even when it feels terribly personal and hard, your child is valuable, and the work you do will last a lifetime. We're cheering you on in the process!

Courtesy of The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, CWTNT, (www.NCTSN.org).

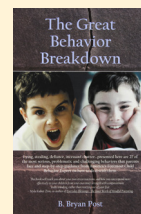
Tips for being a fabulous trauma-informed parent:

- Be nurturing.
- Be consistent.
- Establish dialog. Stop, sit, and listen.
- Play.
- Teach feelings.
- Model and teach appropriate behaviors.
- Help the child self-regulate.
- Understand the behavior before imposing punishment or consequences.
- Use emotions as a parenting tool. Go for a 6:1 ratio of praise to correction.
- Have realistic expectations.
- Take care of yourself.

Suggested reading to strengthen adoptive families:



"The Connected Child"
by Karyn B. Purvis, Ph.D.,
& David R. Cross, Ph.D.



"The Great Behavior Breakdown" by
B. Bryan Post



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All three Post-Adoption Resource Centers have many family fun events planned, as well as support groups and trainings. Please check your Post Adoption Resource Center region's Facebook page or website, watch for monthly calendars, or give us a call to find out what is available near you.

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