

## Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

Healing happens in a relationship. But as we all know, sometimes the people who are hurting the most are also the most difficult to connect with. The challenges to that connection are often caused by the behaviors we see most frequently. This can be especially difficult when it comes to the children in our care. To connect with children with challenging behaviors due to traumatic experiences, it is essential to gain a better understanding of ourselves and of the children.

One of the most important things for a caregiver to remember when working with children who have experienced trauma is the need for patience and persistence. We must constantly remind ourselves that we are the ones who can initiate change in this situation. While it may seem urgent to change the child's behavior first, we must also consider if we are creating an environment where the child can communicate differently. This can be a difficult concept to accept, but it's a crucial part of our role.

Here is a key point to remember. The behavior we observe reflects the child's experiences, not their identity. The behavior is a form of communication; the child is telling the adult in their lives that something is hurting. This is where we can evaluate the next steps. Does our approach show the

child that we are creating a brave space for them to heal? Or does our approach show them that this is a space where they need to continue to protect themselves?

It can feel counterintuitive at first. We initially think, as adults, that we need to teach what behaviors are right and what behaviors are wrong. But in the case of a child who has experienced trauma, their behavior is communicating their pain. So, instead of teaching them that it is wrong that they feel pain, which is what we are doing when we punish the behavior, we need to

teach them how to bravely and responsibly communicate their hurt.

Over time, the hope is that their behaviors will then start to communicate their healing.

### What Behaviors Can Look Like for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

You may see emotional, behavioral, and physical delays in children who have experienced trauma.

Brain development is altered, resulting in children having difficulty controlling emotions and behavior.

For example, when a child has experienced parental separation, chronic abuse, or neglect, there is a part of their brain, the amygdala, that is telling them that they may not be safe. When the abuse or neglect has been chronic, the hyper-arousal response in



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the brain may cause persistent stress; in other words, the children begin to always feel unsafe. Children may become wired to experience the world as uncaring and unsafe. Even if it looks like a caring and safe place for the caregiver.

As mentioned earlier, some behaviors communicate this persistent feeling of the world being unsafe or uncaring. And sometimes, we, as caregivers, need more people to help us create a brave and healing environment where the kids in our care feel like they can bravely communicate their feelings. We recommend contacting a mental health professional if the child in your care experiences any of the following symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Sleep disturbances
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Hyperactivity
- Persistent levels of fear
- Flashbacks
- Episodes of being easily startled
- Emotional numbness
- Episodes of a racing heart and sweating (unrelated to exercise)
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts or actions

Finding a therapist that you and the child trust is imperative when supporting kids who have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other trauma.

As a caregiver, you need to be able to share your observations of the child in a way that does not sound like these behaviors are who the child is. These are things the child is experiencing as a result of the hurt and pain they are feeling.

Healing is a process, and it can often take a long time to help kids overcome the trauma of their past. It can also be hard for others to recognize the real progress they're making by

being in an emotionally brave and stable home.

### **Interventions for Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma**

Your response to children who have experienced trauma has a definite impact on them. Being calm, organized, and in control reassures children that they are in a safe place where they can bravely share their hurts and emotions. We hope you find the following tips helpful.

- Develop a daily routine and prepare children for daily events. Unexpected changes can often create an environment where children feel unsafe or uncomfortable, which may result in dysregulated behavior.
- Set gentle but firm boundaries.
- Understand that you cannot teach responsibility while the child is dysregulated. While dysregulated, your goal is to create a space where they feel safe and can be brave with their emotions. When they are regulated, you can teach and model better ways to communicate their feelings.
- Take time to listen to the children in your care. Being brave is hard. They are being brave if they are talking to you about their feelings. Listen, even if you don't agree with everything that is being said.
- When you can, give children choices and a sense of control by allowing them to make as many choices as possible. For example, what control can you give if a child refuses to sit at the table to eat dinner with you? Could you say, "Okay, would you like to pull a chair up to the counter to eat tonight instead?"
- Make only promises that can be kept. Follow-through helps develop trusting relationships.
- Nurture and comfort through touch (when appropriate) and conversation. Pay attention to how the children respond to physical touch and adjust your response

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and boundaries accordingly.

- Continue learning about caring for children who have experienced trauma. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center provides free opportunities to stay updated on the latest information and resources.

### Meeting the Needs of Children

Children who have experienced trauma often function at varying levels behaviorally, emotionally, and physically. At what level of development are the children in your care? Acknowledge this functioning level and parent them accordingly in order to meet their particular needs.

Children who have been exposed to parental separation, abuse, neglect, or violence often exhibit emotions and behaviors at a developmental level that is not typical to their age, express strong emotions, and may also have physical delays.

Some ways to meet these exceptional needs of children include:

- Let children know that having powerful emotions like fear, sadness, anger, pain, and rage is okay.
- Follow the child's lead and let them talk, draw, and write about the trauma. Share this information with the child's treatment team.
- If children seem upset or show increased symptoms during certain activities, end the activities. Often, a smell, a place, a food, or a sound can trigger a reminder of the past trauma, and symptoms may resurface. You may not understand why it is happening. But you will know that they suddenly feel unsafe. It is your responsibility to end the activity.
- Keeping a log or journal of behaviors can be helpful in further assessment and treatment when shared with the child's treatment team.
- Be a role model and teach appropriate

social and emotional behaviors and physical boundaries.

- Be patient. Remember that the impact of trauma on children can have long-term effects, some of which may last for years.
- Provide insight into the day-to-day care of the children in your care by communicating often with the child's social worker, teacher, therapist, psychiatrist, and other treatment team members.

Helping children and youth heal from trauma can be a complex and complicated journey. The Resource Team at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to support you every step of the way.



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## Resources

### From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Jonathon Letters: One Family's Use of Support as They Took in, and Fell in Love with, a Troubled Child*, by Michael Trout & Lori Thomas
- *Understanding Traumatized and Maltreated Children: The Core Concepts* (DVD)
- *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, by Bruce Perry & Maia Szalavitz
- Virtual Resource Kit: [Looking at Challenging Behaviors via a Trauma-Informed Lens](#)
- *Child Trauma Handbook: A Guide for Helping Trauma Exposed Children*, by Ricky Greenwaid
- *Fostering Resilient Learners – Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*, by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall
- *Understanding Traumatized and Maltreated Children: The Core Concepts*, by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. (DVD)

### Tip Sheets

- [Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean? How Children Process & Respond to Trauma](#)
- [Caregiver Trauma & Resilience: Tips to Keep Caring](#)
- [Recognizing Trauma Triggers](#)
- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma](#)

### Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Lying as Trauma-Driven Behavior](#)
- [Everyday Language and How It Impacts Trauma](#)
- [Those Complicated Teen Years: Is It Trauma, Adoption, or Typical Development?](#)
- [Relative Caregiver Series: The Impact of](#)

### [Toxic Stress, Trauma, and Loss](#)

- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)
- [Utilizing Creative Arts in Treatment](#)

### Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Ask "What Happened to You" Not "What's Wrong With You"](#)
- [What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean](#)