From One Generation to the Next: Understanding Generational Trauma

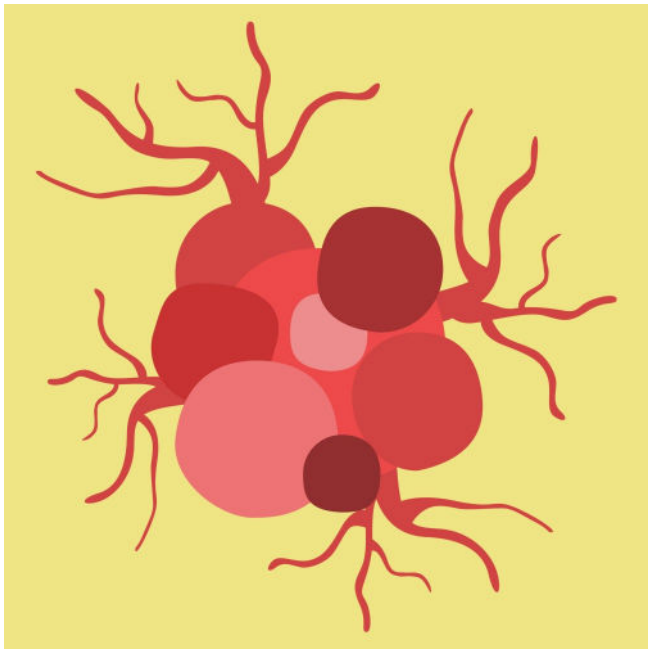
As caregivers, we often focus on meeting the day-to-day needs of the children in our care, ensuring they're safe, fed, supported, and loved. But sometimes, challenges emerge that feel bigger than the moment, reactions or behaviors that seem rooted in something deeper. That "something deeper" can often be traced back to trauma, including trauma that didn't begin with the members of the family themselves. Understanding how trauma can echo across generations gives us insight into the behavior of all family members—including our own. Let's explore what generational trauma is and how it may be showing up in our families and homes.

Trauma is a global issue. You read about it in newspapers, hear about it on television, and many people reference their past and current traumas on social media. According to a study done by the World Health Organization, more than 70% of people will experience a traumatic event at some point in life. Every child who has been adopted, been in out-of-home care, or who is living with a relative outside of their immediate family has experienced trauma on some level. A child who has suffered trauma is likely to struggle with concentration, memory, language development, emotional regulation, social skills, and forming trusting relationships.

In this tip sheet, we will be focusing on generational trauma, also known as intergenerational trauma. This type of trauma is defined as psychological damage caused by exposure to a traumatic event or a collection of events experienced by previous generations. It's important to note that generational trauma impacts all caregivers of children, not just birth parents.

Continued on page 2

Generational trauma affects family units–it doesn't end with one individual. Instead, it passes through one generation to the next. Whether we know it or not, the adverse life events that our elders and ancestors experienced are within us and affect how we live and parent. Research suggests that generational trauma can be passed down as far as four generations from the first trauma experience.



So, how exactly does trauma make its way from one generation to the next? It's not always obvious or intentional. In fact, trauma can be carried forward in many ways—through biology, behavior, beliefs, and even silence. One powerful way it is passed on is through culture and storytelling—what we hear, what we're taught to believe, and what we come to expect about the world.

Cultural Transmission

Cultural transmission refers to how generational trauma can be passed down through family stories, shared worldviews, and deeply held beliefs. A child who grows up hearing stories about their parents' or grandparents' traumatic experiences may be more likely to experience anxiety or depression themselves.

An example of cultural transmission of trauma is the Tuskegee experiment that began in 1932. Black patients in the South were offered free medical care and were instead experimented on by white healthcare providers. To track a disease's full progression, doctors provided no care as the study's participants experienced severe health problems, including blindness, mental impairment, and even death. As a result of the Tuskegee experiment, many African Americans developed a lingering, deep mistrust of public health officials.

While cultural messages shape how we see the world, trauma's impact doesn't stop at stories and beliefs—it can be carried in our very cells. Emerging research shows that trauma can be encoded in our biology, passed from one generation to the next through changes in how our genes function. As caregivers, this helps us understand that some of the struggles children (and we) face may be rooted in inherited, invisible wounds. This is known as genetic transmission.

Continued on page 3

Genetic Transmission

Epigenetics is a field of study examining how genes can change due to certain behaviors and environmental factors. Genetic transmission of trauma can affect a person's DNA and potentially influence the health of future generations.

Research has shown that parents who are exposed to stressors such as food insecurity or abuse have children who are more susceptible to diseases as adults. Parents who experience traumatic stress or hardship can experience epigenetic changes, and these changes can affect their future offspring well into adulthood. One example of this can be seen in the children of Holocaust survivors. They are more likely to have epigenetic markers that put them at greater risk of developing certain diseases, such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

A research team from the University of Oregon recently found that a birth mother's childhood experiences of trauma can predict their children's behavior difficulties, even when the mothers did not raise their children, who were adopted as newborns.

While genes may carry traces of our family's past, so do the environments we grow up in. Trauma isn't only inherited biologically—it's also learned through what children see, hear, and experience firsthand. How we respond to stress, show love, or handle conflict often mirrors what we've witnessed ourselves.

As caregivers, this can be a tender place to pause. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for the children in our care is look honestly at our early experiences and learned behaviors. It's not about blame—it's about understanding the patterns we carry so we can choose how (or whether) to pass them on. The following form of generational trauma—direct exposure and learned behavior—reminds us how deeply children are shaped by the adults around them.

Direct Exposure and Learned Behavior

Generational trauma can occur from direct exposure in several ways. For example, a child who witnesses or experiences domestic violence, abuse, or neglect is more likely to develop their own trauma. And children raised by adults who have their own unresolved trauma may inherit this trauma through their parenting style and behaviors. If a child's adoptive or foster parents also experienced stressful events as children, then the child's behavior issues may be even more pronounced.

Children learn from the adults in their lives, and if those adults have experienced trauma, they may pass on unhealthy coping mechanisms and behaviors to their children. For example, a child who grows up in a household with domestic violence may

Continued on page 4

learn to use violence as a way to resolve conflict. This is how learned behavior can lead to generational trauma.

Are you unsure if you have unresolved trauma as a parent? Here are some questions to think about:

- When a child does something that irritates you, does your reaction feel proportionate and safe?
- Do you often feel guilty about how you responded to an event?
- How would your parents or caregivers have reacted if you had acted in the way this child did? Would you be yelled at? Spanked? Ignored?

If you answered yes to any of these questions when dealing with difficult behavior, you may be feeling triggered. Being triggered goes beyond being uncomfortable or offended. It means your nervous system was triggered into believing you were in danger. At times like this, it can be tough to calm down. And once calm, you may feel guilty after logic and reason return.

Our brains work to keep us safe in times of danger, and when triggered, survival is our priority. So, when your first grader says or does something that would've sent your parents into a rage, your brain and nervous system remember that sequence of events and prepare to safeguard you against it. You may move backwards in time to the safety of your "normal," which was created in childhood, back to the deeply-rooted neural pathways created by hundreds and thousands of experiences. However, noticing when this is happening is enough to begin to make the space required to change the reactions.

Reading about how trauma is passed from one generation to the next can feel overwhelming, especially when you're doing your best to care for children who have already experienced so much. You may be thinking, "What's the good news?" The good news is trauma may be part of a family's story, but it doesn't have to be the ending.

Healing is possible. And even small, consistent moments of safety, connection, and support can begin to interrupt the trauma cycle. The following section explores how positive life experiences—especially those offered by caring adults—can shift a child's path and even ripple into future generations.

Continued on page 5

Positive Life Experiences and the Trauma Cycle

Positive life experiences can change families at the molecular level for future generations. Providing healing and care for children and adults means addressing generational challenges. Breaking generational trauma is complex, with no easy solution.

However, generational trauma cannot outweigh the positive experiences in early life that can help build resilience and protect a child from the effects of trauma. Having a parent who loves you, a teacher who understands and believes in you, or a trusted friend to confide in may diminish the long-term effects of early trauma, according to psychologists.

The first step to stopping the trauma cycle is preventing future trauma. The best way to do this is to seek professional care. Counselors and mental health professionals have the tools and experience to help people process their trauma, understand its cause, and work to prevent it from happening again. They can help you discover how past events shape your current behavior.

Group therapy and support groups may offer a safe place to learn coping skills, share your experiences, and learn from others. Generational trauma is even harder for children who are adopted or are in out-of-home care to recover from because, sometimes, they may have no idea what the trauma was or when it happened.

Although generational trauma is an enormous challenge, we can end on a hopeful note. The ever-evolving concept of the family unit is seen by many as the foundation of human survival, connection, and support. By recognizing and healing from generational trauma, we can alter the course of society's future.

If you're reading this, it means you care deeply—and that matters more than you know. Whether you're parenting a child through adoption, guardianship, foster care, or kinship care, you're already part of the healing. By showing up, staying curious, and being willing to reflect on your own story, you are helping to rewrite theirs. Breaking cycles of trauma doesn't require perfection—it just takes presence, compassion, and the courage to keep going. And you don't have to do it alone. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here with support, community, and resources to walk with you every step of the way.

Resources on Next Page

Resources

From the Resource Library
- DVD: "The Brain: Effects of Childhood Trauma"
- *The Body Keeps the Score—Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,* by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.

Tip Sheets
- Recognizing Trauma Triggers

Training From the Champion Classrooms
- Blocked Care: What to Do When You Run Out of Compassion
- Mental Health 101: An Introduction to NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Wisconsin
- Healing-Centered Engagement: The Power of Community and Connection

Additional Resources
- Adoption Study Links Child Behavior Issues to Mother's Trauma
- Inheriting the Past: A Guide to Generational Trauma
- Generational Trauma: Breaking the Cycle of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Resources on Next Page