



Caring for Children Under Five

Many new parents, particularly first-time parents, set their sights on caring for children under the age of five. They anticipate all the joy and fun that awaits caring for a little one. Yet, it's important to also come with a good understanding of the challenges and needs of young children separated from their families.

The first five years of life are crucial to a child's brain development. Experiences and relationships formed with adult caregivers during this time can have life-long implications for well-being. Unrealistic expectations can result in a disappointing and frustrating parenting experience and, worse yet, cause additional trauma to a vulnerable child.

What to Expect

- Expect that preschoolers come with trauma, just like school-aged kids. (Even a newborn coming directly from the hospital has experienced trauma.) Being separated from birth family is trauma.
- Expect BIG behaviors as a result of the trauma. Particularly for a child too young to understand what is happening to them, placement in your home may be terrifying. That fear can play out as challenging behaviors such as tantrums, meltdowns, and physical aggression.
- Expect the child may not be on track developmentally and could require intensive services such as a birth-to-three program, therapies (physical, speech, occupational, play), medical appointments, or other social-emotional services. Early intervention is crucial.
- Expect that bonding and attachment will not happen immediately and automatically simply because the child is young.
- Expect that parenting a preschooler with a trauma history may look much different from parenting other preschoolers you may know. Traditional strategies for interpreting and/or addressing behaviors may be ineffective or harmful. For example, letting a baby "just cry it out" may have dramatically different implications for an infant with secure attachment versus a child whose most basic needs have been consistently neglected.
- Expect to need a support system of family and friends, particularly those who are trauma-informed.
- Expect that it will take a tremendous amount of time, energy, patience, flexibility, and commitment to create safety and security for a young child. Consider if your situation allows you to meet the child's needs during these crucial developmental years.

How to Prepare

- Learn all you can about trauma-informed care, the impact of trauma on child development, grief, loss, felt safety, and secure attachment before accepting a preschooler into your home.



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- Connect with other parents and caregivers. Take advantage of opportunities to gain experience caring for a young child with a trauma history by providing respite care or babysitting.
- If you're a working parent, check with your employer about family leave eligibility, PTO, or other arrangements to spend as much time as possible transitioning a young child to your home.
- Will you be needing daycare? Start scoping out the quality and availability of childcare options in your community. (See the link for YoungStar, Wisconsin's childcare quality rating system, in the Resource section.)
- Carefully examine your rationale for wanting to parent a preschooler. Is this the age group where you have the most to offer? Is your decision grounded in accurate information and expectations?

A secure and stable living environment is essential for every child separated from their family, but it is especially crucial during the first five years of a child's brain development. Careful consideration of the needs and challenges of children under five—coupled with realistic expectations for both the child and ourselves—can help build life-long, healthy, and healing relationships.

For more information, support, or resources, please call the Wisconsin Family Connections Center at 1-800-762-8063 or email us at info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org.

Resources

From [the Resource Library](#)

- *Healing Children Through Trust and Relationships*, by TCU Institute of Child Development
- *Healing Days – A Guide for Kids Who Have Experienced Trauma*, by Susan Farber Strauss

Tip Sheets

- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-Utero Stress & Trauma](#)
- [Grief & Loss: Making Space for Healing](#)
- [What Grief Looks Like for Children & Youth in Foster Care](#)

Training From [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity & Loss](#)
- [Building Relationships: Connecting With Your Child Through Play](#)
- [Healing-Centered Engagement: The Power of Community and Connection](#)

Additional Resources

- [YoungStar](#)
- [The Effects of Grief and Loss on Children in Foster Care](#)
- [Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma](#)