Communicating About Kids in Care: Understanding Stigmas & Stereotypes

Take a moment to think of the representations you've seen of children who were adopted or in foster care throughout your lifetime. Television, movies, news stories, and social media have often portrayed these youth using stereotypes. Children who are part of "the system" are usually shown in one of two ways: they are frequently depicted as disadvantaged kids with struggles that they can't overcome. These troubled youth lash out at anyone who wants to be close to them to push them away. Or these young people may be portrayed as "miracles" after achieving some level of success. Adoption is sometimes depicted as a reward after great hardship, such as in the films *Annie*, *Instant Family*, or *Kung Fu Panda 2*.

Negative attitudes and misgivings towards relative care, adoption, and foster care are so ingrained in pop culture that they're almost invisible. Many shows and movies make light of it and go for casual "he/she is adopted" jokes to explain socially unacceptable behavior or to indicate this person doesn't belong. These jokes can be emotionally damaging when internalized by children who have been adopted, who are being cared for by relatives, those in foster care, and their families.

Stigmatized and Stereotyped

Stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Children who were adopted and youth in care are often stigmatized because their trauma has been misinterpreted. These children are aware of how others may see them, which affects their psychological health and development. Once these children become teenagers, their identity struggles are more complex than those of the average young adult.

An older youth in care shared in the online magazine The Imprint, "For a long time, I myself believed what adults both involved in and outside the child welfare system thought of me. I remember overhearing a social worker referring to me while speaking with a foster parent as a 'lost cause.' That was not the last time I heard those words during my time in care. It took many years for me to shake the preconceived notions that followed me for most of my life." Another youth shared, "The thing is that we are just kids like anyone else. We deal with more unfortunate events in our lives than most people do at our age, but we have resources and support, and like any normal person, we try to work through our baggage. Nobody wants to be a statistic."

Other People's Words

The child in your care has a past you first learn about through a conversation or in print. No matter the child's age, their life experience cannot be shared in so few words. There may be descriptions provided

by multiple caseworkers, therapists, educators, and birth parents. Read, listen, and accept all the information, but make conclusions based on your experiences with the child. It is imperative to put the negative feedback from others in the perspective of the trauma the children have endured. Children in foster care often carry extensive documentation of their most difficult moments — records that follow them from placement to placement and can color how every new adult in their life sees them before they've even met. It's worth asking: are these records capturing who this child is, or what this child has been through? It's also important to recognize that the behaviors documented in case files are often trauma responses, not character flaws. In fact, Wisconsin's own child welfare data has identified "child behavior problems" as one of the leading stated reasons for removal — yet those behaviors are almost always rooted in experiences of abuse, neglect, or instability, not in something wrong with the child themselves. Unfortunately, case notes can also contain inaccurate information. This could happen due to having multiple caseworkers or, in the case of a sibling group, due to confusion about which child the information pertains to. Sometimes, an incident that isn't remarkable in the context of common childhood mistakes becomes a big deal when that child is in care. Every event seems to be examined more closely than it would be for the average child.

One family shared the story of what it was like at the beginning of the placement process for two of the young siblings they adopted. "We were excited to start the first overnight sleepovers at our home. We concentrated on making the boys feel safe, wanted, and joyful. Although it was exhausting, we had a great time together. We didn't expect the struggle that came at bath time. These kids pitched a fit! Full-on tantrums, screaming, and … fear. We couldn't understand it. When we were able to calm them down, they shared that a former caregiver was abusive. The bathroom was where they were hit with hairbrushes and forced to sit in hot tubs of water as punishment. No record of this happening was shared with us. We learned something profound that night. Always look for the reason behind the behavior. This was way beyond not wanting to get cleaned up for bed. Believing and listening to them helped build a foundation of trust in our relationship."

It would have been easy for this family to believe the words on paper they had previously read about their kids. It was indicated that they were defiant, prone to temper tantrums, didn't listen, couldn't sit still, and many more negative descriptions—most of which could describe lots of kids without a trauma background. However, looking at these behaviors through a trauma-informed lens, you can see that these weren't bad children. They were children who had experienced bad situations.

School Issues

Nowhere are the words on paper or proclamation of foster care status more impactful than at school. As an adoptive or foster parent or relative caregiver, you may find that the school system takes up more of your time than you could have ever imagined. A large proportion of youth who were adopted or who are in care receive special education services. Unfortunately, sometimes, the low educational achievements and behavior problems of these youth can be attributed to negative and stigmatizing mindsets and comments from school staff.

Research has revealed that almost three-fourths of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) of students in foster care included one or more negative or critical comments. For example, when describing how a child lost motivation to perform well in class, a teacher noted that the youth was abandoned by his mother, placed with his grandmother, rejected, and returned to foster care. Nevertheless, the teacher concluded, "He needs to stop brooding and get on with his life." In addition, research indicates that when teachers criticize youths' poor school performance and attribute their poor outcomes to their abilities, these kids will exhibit less effort and low motivation to complete schoolwork.

What can you do to make school a more positive experience and not a constant battleground? First, you may need to set boundaries with the teachers and administrators. To have a more harmonious home life, problems at school need to be addressed there. Or, as one adoptive family put it, "school takes care of school." For example, if the middle-school child in your care calls someone an inappropriate name, does that merit a phone call home? Or can the school staff take care of that on their own? Would the parents of a child without the stigma of foster care or adoption be getting the same phone call? When you have set boundaries with the school and let the professionals figure out how best to educate your child, your home will be a safe place to land at the end of a hard day. It can also help to pick your battles. Schoolwork can often be addressed at school through natural consequences like lost recess or staying late — and what children learn from that is accountability, not shame. Meanwhile, home becomes what it should be: a safe place to land.

Many children who have experienced trauma may be on a different developmental timeline than their peers — and different doesn't mean behind. It means they're moving at the pace that makes sense for what they've lived through. You may find it helpful to share context about a child's experiences with school staff, framing behaviors through a trauma-informed lens rather than a behavioral one. How much you share depends on the child's age, your relationship with school staff, and what the child is comfortable with, especially for teenagers. Remember that confidentiality guidelines must be followed if you are a foster parent. When teachers raise concerns, try to redirect the conversation toward strengths. If a teacher mentions that a child is struggling to focus, you might ask, "What's one thing you've noticed they genuinely enjoy or do well?" Celebrating small victories — and encouraging school staff to do the same — builds momentum that negative feedback rarely does.

Working Together

Overcoming stigma and stereotypes takes a tremendous amount of patience. Each day is a new start. A second-grade teacher shared a story of a child who had spent the first four years of his life steeped in traumatic experiences and slowly made progress with anger issues at school. "I knew things were turning around when his little arms were sweeping everything off my desk in a fit of rage, but he slowed down and maneuvered around my can of Mountain Dew so it didn't spill!" Celebrate small successes day by day and watch them turn into long-term behavioral changes.

All children and teens need adults who are there for them — people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them, and show a genuine interest in them. This is how they

learn to care for and love others. A school counselor shared, "Parents can love their children but not necessarily love what they do — and children need to trust that this is true." We tend to praise children more when they are younger, but teenagers need praise, too, even though they act too cool to care. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that support from family, friends, school staff, and community members is needed to foster a sense of safety at home, at school, and in the community. Instead of focusing on negative stereotypes, family members, teachers, mental health providers, and child welfare workers can all work together to create a positive outlook for the child.

Changing the Narrative

Awareness is the first step — but it's not enough on its own. Changing how our culture thinks and talks about children in care requires intentional effort across every system that touches their lives: the media, schools, health care, child welfare agencies, and our own families and communities. It starts with the language we use, the assumptions we examine, and the stories we choose to tell and amplify. When we hear an inaccurate or harmful statement about a child in care — whether from a teacher, a neighbor, or a news story — we can gently offer a different frame. When we fill out a form or write a note about a child, we can ask whether our words reflect who they are or only what they've been through. We can ask "What happened to you?" instead of "What's wrong with you?" — and model that shift for others. Every person who interacts with a child in care has the opportunity to help rewrite their story.

Resources

From the Resource Library

- *Fostering Resilient Learners – Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*, by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall

Additional Resources

- Stop Traumatizing Teens in Foster Care With Negative Stigma
- Stigma Associated with Youth in the Foster Care System
- Teachers' Negative Comments Toward Youth in Foster Care with Disabilities: How Do They Relate to Youths' Problem Behaviors, School Attitudes, and School Performance?
- An exploration of the effects of stigma on the experiences of foster care alumni
- Every Kid Needs a Champion | Rita Pierson | TED Talk
- Words Matter: Hurtful and Helpful Language About and With Youth in Foster Care | Dougy Center