

Discussion Guide: The Impact of Trauma on Children's Behavior

This guide is designed to help parent group leaders facilitate a discussion on trauma and its effects, helping parents and caregivers better respond to their children's behaviors and need for attachment and healing. This guide assumes that group participants understand the basics of trauma, understanding that childhood trauma can affect children's development and behavior.

Preparation prior to the meeting

Trauma can be an intense subject to discuss, and the individual experiences of group members and their children may make this subject difficult for them. Here are some tips to facilitate this conversation safely and effectively.¹

- Remind group members to rely on group agreements or ground rules previously set by the group. These can be especially helpful during emotional conversations.
- Encourage members to leave the space during the discussion if they need to.
- Remind group members to assume good intent and seek to understand each other's perspectives about trauma.
- Incorporate self-care activities into the meeting.²
- Remind members that their children's stories belong to their children. It is important to share respectfully and with the understanding that the group is a place of safety and confidentiality. We share with purpose and only what is necessary. We share our stories to help one another learn.

Say

Most children in foster and kinship care have been exposed to some form of trauma, and many have experienced ongoing or multiple forms of trauma. Because of these experiences, children may view and react to people and events in ways that seem unusual, exaggerated, or irrational. For adoptive, foster, and kinship families, it is important to acknowledge and understand

¹ For more information about effective meeting facilitation, please read the AdoptUSKids publication, *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders*.

² Find group self-care activities and more in the AdoptUSKids publication, *Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders*.

the lasting and long-term effects of childhood trauma. Our discussion today will focus on how trauma can affect behaviors and strategies for how to respond to your child's behaviors in a trauma-responsive way.

Do

Let's watch this video of educational specialist Laura Phipps laying a foundation of the three major impacts of trauma that parents should be aware of and respond to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPftosmseYE>

Say

That was just a short video, but I think it was packed with important information. What were some of the key points that you took from Laura's presentation?

Do

During the discussion, make sure the following points are covered:

- The three big impacts of trauma are cognitive development, attachment, and triggers.
- The behaviors exhibited by children with trauma experiences are adaptive and meant to support survival.
- Because of their past experiences, children may often respond to what we feel is a safe or typical situation as if it is a danger or threat.

Say

Let's talk about what trauma can look and feel like and then take a deeper dive into the impacts that Laura has identified, while keeping the following facts in mind:

- Trauma does not only result from abuse or neglect. Poverty, structural racism, and experiencing natural disasters can also cause trauma.
- Trauma impacts each individual differently, though the effect is likely to be more significant if the trauma is ongoing.
- Trauma that happens during childhood is more likely to be detrimental than trauma that happens in adulthood due to its impact on brain development.

Topic 1: Trauma and behavior

Say

When children have experienced trauma, their bodies, brains, and nervous systems adapt in an effort to protect them. This may result in behaviors that help them survive and function in a traumatic environment, such as aggression, disobeying authorities, or dissociation. Over time, these protective behaviors become ingrained. And even when children are in a safer environment, their brains and bodies may not recognize that the danger has passed.

Do

Facilitate the conversation, noting the experiences participants share on a flip chart or notebook.

Ask

What behaviors have you seen in your children that you think could be a result of trauma?

Say

Let's look at some scenarios and do some brainstorming about effective strategies to support children in these situations. I will give you a brief scenario, and then let's talk through two essential questions:

1. How can you learn what happened to the child?
2. How can you respond in a trauma-responsive way?

Scenario 1

Your 8-year-old son has wet the bed for the fifth night in a row, something he hasn't done since last year at this time. What could be happening for him?

How can you respond?

Do

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Because this happened at the same time last year, it could be an anniversary effect. Perhaps this was the time of year when a particularly traumatic event happened, like being removed from the family or witnessing domestic violence.

- If it is happening during a time when there are family celebrations, he may be feeling loss and grief related to missing his first family.
- In responding, it's important not to shame or blame the boy; offer compassion and understanding. For example, "I'm so sorry this happened to you again. We'll figure this out together!"
- Work together on strategies that lower the impact on him, like using a comfortable, water-proof mattress pad.
- Assure him that you are not angry, only concerned and wanting to partner with him on figuring out what's behind the bed-wetting.
- Ask him questions and offer ideas as to what the cause might be based on what you know of his history, following his lead and using the language he uses.

Scenario 2

Every time you try to redirect or discipline your 8-year-old daughter, her older sister (9) begins to act out, distracting you from the first child and causing chaos. The two girls had been in foster care together before joining your family a year ago. How can we learn more about what's happening so that we can understand the root causes?

Do

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- What can be discovered from revisiting the information you were provided by the placing worker?
- During a period of calm, when neither child is being redirected, ask the older sister what she is feeling in her stomach and in her head when her sister gets in trouble. Are those physical feelings a clue? Remember that you shouldn't try to ask her these questions during or immediately after the stressful moment. Everyone's brains need time to regulate after stress, and children who have experienced trauma may need as long as 24 hours.
- Often children can talk more easily when they don't have to make eye contact. A conversation during a long car ride can be very useful. It engages the three Rs – regulate (through the movement of the car), relate (through your calm, non-invasive presence), and reason (through asking the older sister how you and she can solve this together). A walk works the same way.

- In cases like this one, the older sibling may have been acting as the parent. Ask for her help in knowing the best way to teach her sister important things. Look for ways that she can be “in charge” of some things while simultaneously working to help her let go of being the parent and learn to be a child again. Often parentified children need to relearn how to play.

Scenario 3

You find food hidden in every drawer of your 15-year-old daughter’s dresser, and she insists it isn’t hers and doesn’t know how it got there.

Do

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- When children have experienced food insecurity, it can take years for them to trust that there will be enough.
- Food is associated with nurturing and care. For a child who may not have experienced that, food could be a substitute for the nurturing that wasn’t provided.
- There are ways to accommodate this behavior. Parents can work with the teen to come up with a plan for making sure her needs are met and her “hunger” is filled. Consider providing her with vermin-proof containers for snacks that she may need in the middle of the night.
- It’s possible that she may be lying to simply avoid getting in trouble, or she may be confabulating, which is when the brain fills in gaps in memory.³ Many children with brain differences as a result of trauma experience confabulation. Correcting the behavior that looks like lying is **not** important for this child in this situation.
- Parents can try to find ways that are mutually enjoyable to fill her up with the nurturing she craves and expand the list of things that satisfy and are not connected to food.

Topic 2: Cognitive impact

Say

The developing brain is sensitive to both good and bad experiences. Maltreatment can alter the physical structure and chemical activity of the brain, influencing learning, health, emotional and social functioning, and behavior, possibly with long-term effects.

³ Find more guidance and information on this topic in another AdoptUSKids discussion guide, *Lying, Confabulation, and Distorted Thinking*.

As Laura explained in the video, the hormones that are continually released when a child is under stress can affect the structure of the brain and result in blocked positive neural pathways and heightened fear and anxiety responses.

Do

Facilitate the conversation using the questions and prompts below, noting what participants share on a flip chart or in a notebook.

1. What are some of the ways that trauma may have affected your child's cognitive development?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

Trauma can cause difficulty with:

- Language and language processing
- Decision-making and problem-solving
- Planning and anticipating consequences
- Working memory and learning from mistakes
- Brain-related growth and development
- Sensory input

2. How might these effects on cognition reveal themselves?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Children may not be able to follow multiple-step or complex instructions.
- Children may be developmentally delayed and development may be scattered across multiple domains. For example, a 12-year-old seventh grader may have the language comprehension of a 10-year-old, the emotional maturity of a 3-year-old, and the decision-making skills of a 7-year-old.
- Children and youth may repeatedly do the same thing that has resulted in a negative consequence.
- At school, they may be in trouble for not doing or forgetting homework. They may be frustrated by their own challenges.
- They may need a lot of stimulation or, alternatively, may be upset by too much stimulation.

3. What are some ways that you can support your child's cognitive development?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Advocate for your child at school from the beginning, being a visible and effective partner.
- Break down instructions, providing them one step at a time.
- Provide opportunities and support for your child to try things, make mistakes, and try again, always offering guidance at the rate and in the way they want it.
- Celebrate small victories and maintain realistic expectations.
- Identify and elevate your child's skills, talents, and interests. Join them in the activities they enjoy whenever you can.
- Provide lots of hands-on opportunities for learning. Many kids learn best by doing.
- Provide many opportunities for learning that isn't based on sitting and listening to a teacher or parent. Go to museums or working farms, cook together, do science kits, etc.

Topic 3: Attachment impact

Say

As we heard in the video, a secure attachment is the foundation for all future development. For children whose attachment has been affected by trauma, the task for us as caregivers is clear: we must rebuild a trusting attachment relationship with them. This can be challenging because often the person the child would have turned to for safety and attachment was also the perpetrator of harm. Rebuilding attachment is a gradual process that is done over time and through consistency. One way to find success in this is to read the cues a child gives and build a relationship by responding to those cues.

Do

Facilitate the conversation using the questions and prompts provided, noting what participants share on a flip chart or in a notebook.

1. What are some signs that a child's capacity for attachment has been affected by trauma?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- The child has trouble being soothed when sick, hurt, or sad.

- The child has anxiety and strong reactions when separated from the caregiver.
- The child is withdrawn and unable to engage with the rest of the family in a typical manner.
- The child is frequently aggressive or defiant, particularly with caregivers and other adults.
- The child experiences correction or redirection as a potential threat.

2. What are some ways that you can build attachment?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Parallel play, letting the child decide the play and lead it, while you or your co-parent follow along.
- Becoming attuned and responsive to your child's moods and feelings; mirroring their sadness, joy, etc.
- Being available when and in ways that your child needs and wants.
- Understand and respond to your child's emotional age, which is often quite a bit younger than their chronological age.
- Providing support and guidance, rather than anger, when your child makes a mistake, misbehaves, acts out, etc.

Topic 4: Trauma triggers

Say

It is important for caregivers to recognize that triggers are related to the five senses as much or more so than actual events. The smell of an apple pie might remind them of a holiday memory. The sound of a siren or the sight of flashing lights can be stressful. The feeling of having one's hair brushed can bring a child back in time to when their parent brushed their hair.

Children with trauma histories often react to events in the present as if they are in the past. These are survival instincts created during a time of need and ingrained over time. What was appropriate for survival when the trauma was happening often becomes troublesome when the threat is gone.

Do

Facilitate the conversation using the questions and prompts below, noting what the participants share on a flip chart or in a notebook.

3. What are some of the triggers that you have observed in your child?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Smells
- Time of day
- Clothing
- The sound of someone's voice
- A location

4. How can you respond when you see that your child has been triggered?

Be sure the following points are made during the discussion:

- Remain calm and provide a safe, quiet space for your child to calm down.
- Keep track of triggers you see, and try to avoid those triggers in the future.
- Work with your child to develop safety plans that they are in charge of.
- Agree on a signal, catch phrase, or another way for either you or the child to alert the other to a potential trauma trigger, and have a plan for how to respond.
- Work with your extended family and community, the school, medical providers, and others who have regular contact with your child to help them understand both the triggers and effective responses.
- Maintain a consistent and predictable routine as much as you can.

Say

Trauma is complex, and there's no way for us to cover everything you need to know about trauma during this discussion. We should all be continually educating ourselves on the latest science and trying our best to practice trauma-responsive parenting. See the resource section below for helpful websites and publications to help you keep learning.

Resources

- The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)
www.nacac.org
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
www.nctsn.org
- The Beyond Consequences Institute
www.beyondconsequences.com
- The Karyn Purvis Institute for Child Development at Texas Christian University. You can learn about Trust-Based Relational Intervention here, which is a promising practice in caring for children from hard places.
www.child.tcu.edu

AdoptUSKids offers discussion guides, tip sheets, articles, and other tools to help parent group leaders facilitate discussions and manage their groups. You can find these resources at professionals.adoptuskids.org.



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