

## Tips for Being a Fabulous Trauma-Informed Resource Parent

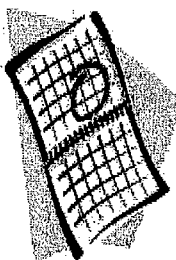


### Be nurturing

**Children who have experienced trauma need to be held, rocked, and cuddled.**

Be physical in caring for and loving them. Be aware that, for many of these children, touch in the past has been associated with pain, torture, or sexual abuse. In these cases, make sure you carefully monitor how they respond—be attuned to their responses and act accordingly.

In many ways, you are providing replacement experiences that should have taken place when they were much younger—but you are doing this when their brains are harder to modify and change. Therefore, they will need even more loving and nurturing experiences to help them develop and grow.



### Be consistent

**Children who have experienced trauma are often very sensitive to changes** in schedules, transitions, surprises, chaotic social situations, changes in a therapist's office, and in any new situation in general. Birthday parties, sleepovers, holidays, family trips, the start and end of the school year, etc., can all be scary and upsetting for them.

**Be “boringly predictable.”** Let children know about changes and transitions many days and even weeks ahead of time. Walk them to and through their new school building before school starts. Keep a large, visible calendar at home in a central location where they can easily see upcoming events. Review it weekly.

If children become anxious when given too much advance information (for example, planning for a visit with a parent at Human Services), scale back. Tune in to each child's comfort zone about change and modify your plan accordingly.



### Establish a dialog

Social interactions are an important part of parenting and of the child's healing process.

**One of the most important and pleasurable things to do is just stop, sit, and listen.** When you are quiet and interactive with kids, you will find that they will begin to show you and tell you about what is really inside them. As simple as this sounds, it is one of the most difficult things for adults to do—to stop, quit worrying about the time or your next task, and really relax into the moment with a child. These children will sense that you are there just for them. They will feel that you care.



### Play

**All attachments begin with play.** Activities that allow you to playfully interact with children are very important. These activities allow the opportunity for a child to be nurtured and begin the healing process.

Play with bubbles or clay or stuffed animals. Dig in the dirt or ride a bike. Just find a way to play with your child.

**This will provide the child with an opportunity to be a child—which may be a very new experience!**



### Teach feelings

**All feelings are okay to feel.** Teach healthy ways to act when having feelings. Explore how other people may feel and how they show their feelings (development of empathy). **Talk about how you and other family members express feelings.**

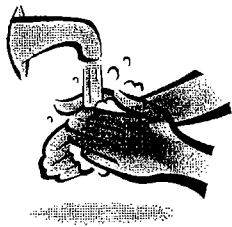


**When you sense that the child is clearly feeling something, wonder out loud about the feelings:** “I wonder if you’re feeling sad that your mom didn’t come to visit” or “I wonder if you feel angry when I say “no.”

Try one of the many games designed to help kids identify and communicate feelings. **Draw pictures of feeling faces** together, or find pictures in magazines of different feelings. Use a digital camera and take pictures of each of you “putting on” different feeling faces, or practice making feeling faces in the mirror. **Label and give words to different feelings and situations in which those feelings are common.** Don’t forget to help the child pay attention to the physical part of their emotional reactions.

### Model and teach appropriate behaviors

**Children who have experienced trauma often do not know how to interact well with adults or other children.** Model positive behaviors yourself, and realize that they are watching you to see how you will respond to different situations.



**Become a “play-by-play announcer”:** “I am going to the sink to wash my hands before dinner.... I take the soap and get my hands soapy, then...” They will see, hear, and imitate your coaching.

**Do not assume they know how to play or how to share feelings.** Help them practice skills in both areas.

**Physical contact with children who have been traumatized can be problematic.** They often don’t know when to hug; how close to stand; when to establish or break eye contact; or under what conditions it is acceptable to pick their nose, touch their genitals, or do grooming behaviors. They often initiate physical contact with strangers, which adults can interpret as affectionate—but it is not. **Gently guide the child on how to interact differently and address the issue every time it occurs.**

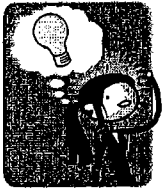


### Help the child to self-regulate

**Children need adults to help them learn to regulate and stay calm.** Teach children that they are safe and protected, and that they don’t have to expect the worst. Provide calming, reassuring interactions. Help them to self-soothe and self-regulate.

**Observe the child at different times during the day and in different situations, and be prepared for how the child will respond.** Show parental “strength” and capacity to keep the child safe and calm during those difficult situations.

Don’t give a child more stimulation than he or she can handle—even fun activities. Find out what helps your child calm down, and make a plan for what to do when you’re not with him or her.



### **Understand the behavior before imposing punishment or consequences**

The more you can learn about the impact of trauma on your child’s development, emotional responses, and behaviors, the more you will be able to develop useful behavioral and social interventions.

For example, when a child hoards food, this act should not be viewed as “stealing,” but as a common and predictable result of being deprived of food during early childhood.

Difficult or problem behaviors also may be the child’s way of “testing” your reactions, based on real past experiences.

Take time to give consequences if you need it. Think about the message you want to give your child, and create a consequence according to that insight. For example, giving a child a “time in” (rather than a “time out”) helps a child to “stop the action” without feeling rejected by having to leave the presence of the caregiver.

Avoid control battles/power struggles by providing the child with two acceptable choices whenever possible. Only give consequences that are enforceable. Take time to “re-attune” following consequences.

### **Use emotions as a parenting tool**

Children who have experienced trauma need an abundance of **warm, sincere praise** when they’ve done something well, and **clear, dispassionate consequences** when they’ve misbehaved. **Go for a 6:1 ratio of praise to correction** (minimum), including positive comments to other adults.



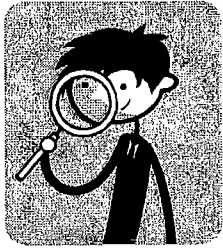
#### **PRAISE** means:

- Positive attitude in body, voice, and facial expression
- Noticing the simplest positive or neutral behaviors and praising them

#### **DISPASSION** means:

- Fewer words
- Soft, firm voice
- Matter-of-fact tone of voice
- Recognizing your own reaction and not letting it bleed through
- Calm body, calm voice, and calm face
- Repetition, if necessary

## Have realistic expectations

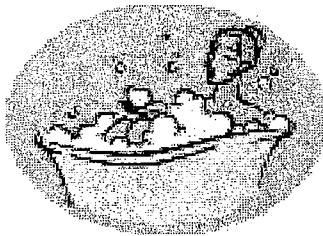


Children who have experienced trauma have much to overcome. Some will not overcome all of their problems. Others will make great strides. Keep in mind that they have been robbed of some, but not all, of their potential.

**Progress may be slow.** The slow progress can be frustrating, and many foster and adoptive parents will feel inadequate because all of the love, time, and effort they spend with their child may not seem to be having any effect. But it does. Don't be hard on yourself. It is normal to feel swamped and

overwhelmed at times when parenting with these challenges.

**Keep in mind that you are planting seeds. Remember to use your “magnifying glass” and “measuring spoons” to gauge progress.**



## Take care of yourself

You cannot provide the consistent, predictable, enriching, and nurturing care a child needs if you are depleted. You will not be able to help if you are exhausted, depressed, angry, overwhelmed, or resentful.

**Rest.** Get support. Use respite care periodically to have some “adult time.”

**Nurture your own primary relationships** with your partner, own children, family, and friends. Have a hobby or take a class, get a massage, or have a regular night out.

Understand your needs for caring, compassion, and kindness from others.

**Maintain a support network** of others who know the work and the challenges involved. Maintain a strong, trusting relationship with a therapist or coach. Talk about feelings of despair, sadness, grief, or rage when they occur.

Remember to keep your sense of humor, to play, and to find joy in the world.

### **Adapted from**

“How to Be a Fabulous Therapeutic Foster Parent in 10 Not-So-Easy Steps”

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And materials from:

The Child Trauma Clinic, Baylor College of Medicine Texas Medical Center, Houston TX  
and

Casey Family Services Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice