

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT TRAUMA GUIDELINES FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Being a foster parent is an extraordinarily generous and often satisfying experience. However, parenting can be quite challenging and stressful at times. It is important to take good care of yourself by attending to your own physical, emotional, and social needs. Taking care of yourself puts you in a better position to meet your children's needs. Parenting a youngster who has suffered significant traumatic experiences in childhood brings with it special challenges.

Suggestions and tips for helping a child cope with these experiences are noted below.

1. Process your own personal feelings. As you learn about the child's experiences, it is important to share your feelings with other adults or professionals who can help you to cope. If you are already aware of the child's trauma history, it can be helpful to process your own personal feelings. This may be particularly important if you experienced similar traumas as a child.
2. Model open discussion. If the child shares thoughts or feelings about traumatic experiences, show the child that you are willing to listen and talk about their experience openly, rather than avoiding the topic. However, you need not draw out details or engage in extensive conversations, let the child set the pace.
3. Use active listening -- Listening quietly and using simple, encouraging remarks (such as "*I understand or how did you feel when that happened?*"), repeating back what you heard, and using positive body language and good eye contact.
4. Respond in a calm, clear tone of voice. Provide comfort, but do not make promises that are unrealistic, as much as you may want to (such as "*Nothing bad will ever happen again*").

5. If the child begins to talk about traumatic experiences, encourage the child to
 - a. share thoughts and feelings and
 - b. be prepared for some questions you may not be able to answer immediately. It is fine to say "*That's a very good question - I'm going to have to think (or get some information) about that before I answer it.*"
6. Praise the child's effort to talk with you about trauma, while actively ignoring silliness or avoidant behaviors ("*I'm really glad that you're talking to me about what happened. I'm proud of you.*").
7. After praising the child's effort, when possible, provide constructive feedback if what the child shares reveals misconceptions or lack of information ("*A lot of kids think what happened is their fault. But you know what? It's always the adult's fault.*").
8. If the child shares information with you about abuse or neglect that was not previously reported, follow your state's guidelines for reporting child abuse/neglect. This typically involves calling the state's child abuse hotline and providing the new allegations to a hotline screener.
9. The child likely needs therapy to address the traumatic experiences and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder if:
 - a. the child is talking indiscriminately and repetitively about the trauma
 - b. the child has strong emotional reactions to reminders of the trauma
 - c. the child appears to be reenacting the trauma

If the child is showing any of these signs, it is helpful to have them evaluated at a mental health clinic. Good treatment for

child trauma should include 1) teaching the child skills to handle difficult feelings, which they practice in session and at home; 2) encouraging the child to talk about what happened; 3) meetings with you to help you support the child.