

The Essential Elements of Trauma-Informed Parenting

1. Recognize the impact trauma has had on your child.

Children who have survived trauma can present incredible challenges. But when you view children's behaviors and reactions through the "lens" of their traumatic experience, many of these behaviors and reactions begin to make sense.

Using an understanding of trauma as a foundation, you can work with other members of your child's team to come up with effective strategies to address challenging behaviors and help your child develop new, more positive coping skills.

2. Help your child to feel safe.

Safety is critical for children who have experienced trauma. Many have not felt safe or protected in their own homes, and are in a constant state of alert for the next threat to their well-being.

Children who have been through trauma may be physically safe and still not feel psychologically safe. By keeping your child's trauma history in mind, you can establish an environment that is physically safe and work with your child to understand what it will take to create psychological safety.

3. Help your child to understand and manage overwhelming emotions.

Trauma can cause such intense fear, anger, shame, and helplessness that children are overwhelmed by their feelings. In addition, trauma can derail development so that children fail to learn how to identify, express, or manage their emotional states.

For example, babies learn to regulate and tolerate their shifting feelings by interacting with caring adults. Older children who did not develop these skills during infancy may seem more like babies emotionally. By providing calm, consistent, and loving care, you can set an example for your children and teach them how to define, express, and manage their emotions.

4. Help your child to understand and manage difficult behaviors.

Overwhelming emotion can have a very negative impact on children's behavior, particularly if they cannot make the connection between feelings and behaviors. Because trauma can derail development, children who have experienced trauma may display problem behaviors more typical of younger children.

For example, during the school-age years, children learn how to think before acting. Adolescents who never learned this skill may be especially impulsive and apt to get into trouble. As a trauma-informed resource parent, you can help your children to understand the links between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and to take control of their behavioral responses.

5. Respect and support the positive, stable, and enduring relationships in the life of your child.

Children learn who they are and what the world is like through the connections they make, including

relationships with other people. These connections help children define themselves and their place in the world. Positive, stable relationships play a vital role in helping children heal from trauma.

Children who have been abused or neglected often have insecure attachments to other people. Nevertheless, they may cling to these attachments, which are disrupted or even destroyed when they come into care.

As a trauma-informed resource parent, you can help your child to hold on to what was good about these connections, reshape them, make new meaning from them, and build new, healthier relationships with you and others.

6. Help your child to develop a strength-based understanding of his or her life story.

In order to heal from trauma, children need to develop a strong sense of self, to put their trauma histories in perspective, and to recognize that they are worthwhile and valued individuals.

Unfortunately, many children who have experienced trauma live by an unwritten rule of “Don’t tell anyone anything.” They may believe that what happened to them is somehow their fault because they are bad, or damaged, or did something wrong.

You can help children to overcome these beliefs by being a safe listener when children share, working with children to build bridges across the disruptions in their lives, and helping children to develop a strength-based understanding of their life stories.

7. Be an advocate for your child.

Trauma can affect so many aspects of a child’s life that it takes a team of people and agencies to facilitate recovery. As the one most intimately and consistently connected with your child, you are a critical part of this team. As a trauma-informed resource parent, you can help ensure that efforts are coordinated, and help others to view your children through a trauma lens.

8. Promote and support trauma-focused assessment and treatment for your child.

Children who have experienced trauma often need specialized assessment and treatment in order to heal. The effects of trauma may be misunderstood or even misdiagnosed by clinicians who are not trauma experts. For example, the nervousness and inability to pay attention that comes with trauma may be misdiagnosed as ADHD, or moodiness and irritability may be misdiagnosed as bipolar disorder. Fortunately, there are trauma-focused treatments whose effectiveness has been established. You can use your understanding of trauma and its effects to advocate for the appropriate treatment for your child.

9. Take care of yourself.

Caring for children who have experienced trauma can be very difficult, and can leave resource families feeling drained and exhausted. In order to be effective, it is important to also take care of ourselves, and take action to get the support we need when caring for traumatized children.