



## Fast Facts: Understanding and Healing Trauma and Attachment Disruption in Early Childhood

### Trauma & Symptoms in young children:

- Each person's trauma is individual to them. Children have a wide variety of responses to trauma.
- Trauma is a perceived threat to oneself or someone else. One individual may perceive threat, whereas another does not. In the first few years of life, children process experiencing trauma and witnessing trauma in the same way.
- Trauma impacts the function of the brain and nervous system. Due to the way trauma is stored in the body, even young children and infants can be impacted by early trauma. Their body remembers, even if they don't have conscious memories or the ability to verbalize the trauma.
- When an infant/child experiences trauma, their development is often impacted. Development is like building blocks stacking on each other. Each developmental block after experienced trauma will be impacted. A child will need to go back and repair early blocks to create a strong foundation.
- Here are possible signs of trauma: reactive and moody (irritability, anger, temper tantrums, controlling behavior), withdrawn (decreased interest in activities, prefer to be alone, limited expression of emotion), avoidance of trauma reminders or talking about trauma, intrusive memories, play that contains aspects of the trauma, nightmares, other sleep issues, difficulty concentrating, regression, clinginess, easily startled, extremely watchful.

### Fight, flight, freeze:

When an infant or young child experience attuned, nurturing parenting they learn to see the world as safe, predictable, and capable of meeting their needs. However, when children experience trauma, abuse, and neglect they learn to see the world as unsafe, scary, chaotic, and unable to meet their needs. When an infant/young child perceives a threat an internal alarm bell rings in their brain, which releases stress hormones that prepare them to fight, flight, or freeze. This is an unconscious, biological response. Their alarm bells go off as reminders of their trauma. Reminders may be evident but may also be difficult to discern. They can be subtle sensory experiences. They are no longer responding to the present moment but reacting to the past.

### How attachment trauma impacts relationships:

A child's early experiences with their primary caregiver form a template for how they will be in relationships with others



throughout their life. Children who have experienced trauma within caregiving relationships are working from a maladaptive template and from their fight/ flight/freeze response. This can look like:

- Repeating patterns that are familiar to them. Anything different from the status quo can feel scary. Nurturing, supportive parents can be both what a young child craves the most and what they are
- the most afraid of, or unable to trust. This child may send confusing messages, such as "I love you" one minute and "I hate you, go away" the next. They often feel abandoned if you do give them space.
- Other children cope by becoming overly compliant. On the surface, they look like a model child. However, this overly compliant behavior is a form of fight/flight/freeze - they have given up. They will likely have to go through a period of fight to ultimately heal.
- Another response that a child may have is to seek attention from anyone and everyone who will give it to them. They do not hesitate to go up to strangers or wander off with someone unfamiliar. While it may feel like a good sign to have a child meet you and immediately sit in your lap or give you a hug, it can be an indication of attachment issues. It also makes the child very vulnerable.
- Children can also be triggered by face-to-face nurturing or playful interactions. These types of interactions release 'feel-good' hormones in the brain. When a child has had limited experience with these interactions, their window of tolerance is narrowed. These connections can illicit behavior that appears "hyper" or silly and quickly escalates out of control to fight/ flight/freeze.

## **What you can do:**

- Take care of yourself! Do your best to breathe and remain calm. Don't take the child's behavior personally. Remember: they are reacting to a past trauma, not responding to you in the present moment. It is important to build a support network for yourself. This can include friends, family, support groups, therapists, etc. Find and make time for activities that recharge you.
- Provide empathy. Name your child's feelings and why they might be feeling that way. This can be done without condoning inappropriate language and behavior. Children often do not have an appropriate way to express their pain and hurt. They need to feel heard and understood.
- If a child is in fight/flight/freeze use as little language as possible. They will likely perceive any touch or language as a threat, and it will further escalate their behavior. Breathe and remain calm. Many children in this state will need a bubble of space yet want you to remain in proximity to them. There are some children who calm most quickly with space; however, for many, space will trigger their feelings of rejection and abandonment. Keep in mind it can take an hour or longer for a child to fully regulate and for stress hormones to return to baseline. They are easily re-triggered before this occurs.
- Slowly build in connection. While you likely have an idea of how you dreamed of connecting with your adoptive or foster child, it may be triggering to their system. If their joy becomes over the top and escalates to aggression, find less intense ways to connect and build back up. Maybe they are able to tolerate reading a book near you, but not yet ready for hugs and cuddles. Games like tossing a ball back and forth are good connecting activities. Patterned and repetitive activity.
- If your child is experiencing signs of trauma find a therapist who understands child development, attachment, and trauma. Therapy for young children should be play-based because of their developmental capacity and the way in which trauma is stored in the body. Therapy should include the parent. Whether you have adopted a child or are fostering a child, you matter in this process. You are going to provide them with a new, healthy template of

how to relate to the world. It's going to be hard work. They will need your help and you will need, and deserve, help too. It is crucial you are a part of this process. The MN ADOPT HELP program can help you find an adoption-competent therapist.

## Resources for more in-depth information:

- Conscious Discipline 3-Part Webinar Series: Building Safety and Connection in Foster and Adoptive Families. (A free webinar series to understand foster/adoption related trauma, help children adjust to a new environment, and manage difficult behaviors.)

<https://consciousdiscipline.com/e-learning/webinars/building-safety-and-connection-in-foster-and-adoptive-families-session-1/>

<https://consciousdiscipline.com/e-learning/webinars/building-safety-and-connection-in-foster-and-adoptive-families-session-2/>

<https://consciousdiscipline.com/e-learning/webinars/building-safety-and-connection-in-foster-and-adoptive-families-session-3/>

- Conscious Discipline Understanding Trauma Webinar Series  
<https://consciousdiscipline.com/product/understanding-trauma-webinar-series-individual-1-year/>
- When we are Scared by Chandra Ghosh Ippen  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcAPbDpgoso&feature=youtu.be>)

## Information presented by:



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To learn more about Foster Adopt Minnesota and our efforts to ensure each child will have a permanent family, call 612-861-7115 or visit [www.fosteradoptmn.org](http://www.fosteradoptmn.org).