

APRIL 23, 2019

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, one that induces an abnormally intense and prolonged stress response. Because infant's and young children's reactions may be different from older children's, and because they may not be able to verbalize their reactions to threatening or dangerous events, many people assume that young age protects children from the impact of traumatic experiences. A growing body of research has established that young children—even infants—may be affected by events that threaten their safety or the safety of their parents/caregivers.

Will All Children in Foster Care Experience Trauma?

The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (2011) interviewed a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents and found that approximately half had experienced two or more types of victimization in the past year. Although children who are court-involved are more likely to have experienced trauma and to exhibit increased traumatic stress symptoms, it is important to remember that children have different reactions to exposure to violence, and not all children who experience traumatic events will have lasting issues as a result.

How Does Trauma Affect the Child In My Care?

Young children who experience trauma are at particular risk because their rapidly developing brains are very vulnerable. Early childhood trauma has been associated with reduced size of the brain cortex which is responsible for many complex functions including memory, attention, perceptual awareness, thinking, language, and consciousness. These changes may affect IQ and the ability to regulate emotions. Children who have experienced trauma may exhibit the following symptoms:

- Avoidance
- Numbing
- Arousal
- Attachment issues
- Attention/concentration issues
- Impulsivity
- Oppositional behaviors

How Does Being "Trauma Informed" Help Me as a Foster Parent?

Parenting a child who has experienced trauma requires a shift in the way you think about childhood development as well as the way you communicate with and provide support for the child in your care. Becoming trauma informed opens up a new way of thinking about and acting on the behaviors you experience in your home and can assist you in reducing power struggles and begin to make genuine strides toward improvement.

NEW! Click the Link Below to Watch this Trauma Ted Talk:

[A CALL TO CONNECTION: MAKING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA PERSONAL](#)

This 10 minute Ted Talk by Dr. Allison Jackson talks about what silence and 'not getting involved' cost us with two different stories of children. She talks about the cost of Adverse Childhood Experiences and the frequency of Trauma with individuals.

NOTE TO CAREGIVERS

Caring for children who have been through traumatic events can be very difficult. This note discusses some of the challenges, impact on development, effects of chronic stress and offers some solutions and interventions to help.

[Click Here to Read](#)

Supporting a Shy Child

The child who is a little "slow to warm up" can sometimes get lost in the rush to respond to children with more assertive or outspoken temperaments. Very often it is the quiet child who may need some support to enter play or advocate for himself, but because he doesn't make his needs explicitly known, they may not get met. These children often blossom when provided some support and guidance to cope with group dynamics, and when they are have the opportunity to participate in their own way and build on their own strengths. www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/cautious-slow-to-warm-up.html

The Power of Language

By: Hiliary Burns



*may break my bones,
but names will never
hurt me!*

Most of us remember this school yard chant designed to deflect the words thrown at us on the playground. We chanted this as a mantra believing that if we said it over and over again, it would somehow make the words bounce off of us and not be permanently etched in our psyche forever. My guess is that you can still remember the words flung at you that day on the playground.

Bullying behavior has been around since the dawn of mankind. In early human societies physical battles served as a way to ensure that cultures survived by placing the strongest, most intelligent, in key power positions. As human's evolved and technology advanced, societies had more time to focus on developing governments and religions rather than on daily survival; however our need to dominate didn't go away and we began to shift from solving our problems on the battlefield to solving our problems in the board room. This cultural shift also led to a shift in the way bullying behaviors presented in children and adults. We might not be able to punch our co-worker to get the promotion, but we could certainly use the power of our words to humiliate, embarrass or shame them into believing they didn't deserve it. Enter the internet, and the power of our words shifted once again. Now we could wield the power of our world with relative anonymity.

As a culture we are appalled when we hear stories of young children taking their lives as a result of the bullying or harassing behavior they have endured at school or in their peer group. We write letters to our school board, we pass policies designed to help the victim and punish the bully, and we fund prevention programs. Don't get me wrong, these actions are helping. Awareness always helps, but the stories continue to flood our local and national media; our children are still reporting that those names REALLY ARE hurting them.

As a foster parent you may feel particularly connected to this issue. The children in your care have experienced traumas most others will never be able to understand. They come to you with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues and more. Even if they don't have significant behavioral, emotional or physical issues, they are still different from their peers because of their experience as a "child in the system". They are more vulnerable to words. Their peers are aware (whether their status as a child in foster care has ever been revealed) that something is "different" about this person. And different is scary. Humans have a hard time processing different and when something is different you avoid, you attack and you shame to keep yourself safe.

Here is where we address the elephant in the middle of the room. What language choices do we, as adults, make or choose not to challenge, that gives our children permission to accept the notion that different is scary and that language isn't all that powerful? When I was growing up the word "retard" was used in everyday

conversation. Because it was part of society's daily vernacular I assumed it must be acceptable, it must no longer carry the weight it once did. I was able to say, "Well since everyone uses it, it must be okay." Using the word made me forget that what I was really saying to others was, "if I debase the different I don't have to work to understand the different." To this day I am ashamed at my participation in the usage of that word. I am more ashamed knowing I used it with friends who had siblings with disabilities without understanding the pain they must have experienced at hearing the word and without understanding that it was my own fear of the different that allowed me to feel safe using the word. It is here, where we as parents, educators and mentors have work to do.

I was recently at a conference and one of the presenters, a middle-school teacher, shared their policy is to "name it, claim it and stop it" when assisting their students understand the power of words. As I sat there I couldn't help but think about the depth of these three ideas. How, if we worked to "name it, claim it and stop it" we could begin to shift the culture of language and we could help our children understand that different isn't scary it's just (for lack of a better word) different!

The next time your child/teen (or any child/teen) uses a word like retarded or phrase such as "that's so gay" take two minutes to name it (that phrase you just used is not appropriate), claim it (I don't like to hear that phrase and when you use it you are creating an environment that isn't safe for your peers) and stop it (I would appreciate it if we could work together to find another word that would better describe how you are feeling).

"Name it, claim it, stop it" isn't about punishing, embarrassing or shaming. It's about giving our children/teens and ourselves an opportunity to consider the power of language and the impact it has on others. It also challenges us to really reflect on what we are feeling. Many of our children (foster or biological) simply aren't developmentally armed with the language to articulate how they actually feel. Help arm them with the right words. Help them to understand that something isn't "retarded", but rather difficult, or challenging, or frustrating. Help them to no longer fear the different. In doing this we give our children the opportunity to communicate in the greater world in a healthier and more effective manner. We empower them to understand that different is just that, different, and without our differences this world wouldn't be a dynamic and engaging place to live.

By "naming it, claiming it and stopping it" you demonstrate to your children that language does have power and with great power comes great responsibility. You are allowed to carry your own set of values and beliefs, but you are never allowed to bullying someone making them feel less about who they are. It is our responsibility to continue to move forward as our ancestors once did so someday that school yard chant is as part of our history as our hunter/gatherer days.

