



Trauma Training for CASA

STAR Health



# Why Focus on Trauma?

## Why the recent focus on trauma?

- One in four children experience at least one trauma before they are 16.
- Almost half of middle school students in urban schools reported seeing a stabbing or shooting
- Four out of ten children say they have witnessed violence.

*These numbers are for an “average” child. As you know, foster children have endured many more traumas such as abuse, neglect and frequent moves.*





# Why Focus on Trauma?

- Trauma impacts school performance
- Trauma impairs learning
- Traumatized children often have physical problems
- Traumatized children often have emotional issues





# Why Focus on Trauma?

- Children experience their world within family relationships.
- Being separated from an attachment figure, particularly under traumatic and confusing circumstances, can be very stressful for a child.
- Research has shown that support from their caregivers is a key factor in helping children heal from traumatic events.
- YOU care for these children 24 hours a day, 7 days a week! You have the most impact on how children recover from all the trauma they have been through.



# What Is Child Traumatic Stress?



# What is Child Traumatic Stress?

- Child traumatic stress refers to the physical and emotional responses of a child to threatening events. These are events that threaten the life or safety of someone very important to them.
- Traumatic events make it hard for children to cope.
- They cause the child to feel terrified, powerless and out of control.



# What is Child Traumatic Stress?

A child's response to trauma may have a powerful effect on his or her sense of self. It may also affect how they see the world and the future.

- Trauma may affect a child's:
  - Ability to trust
  - Feelings of safety
  - Ability to adapt to what life throws their way



# Types of Traumatic Stress

Acute trauma is a single event that happened at a specific time.

Examples include:

- Serious accidents
- Witnessing violence
- Natural disasters (earthquakes, wildfires, floods)
- Sudden or violent loss of a loved one

With this type of trauma, children have a variety of powerful feelings and thoughts. Also, their body goes through physical reactions. This is all very frightening and adds to their sense of being overwhelmed.



# Types of Traumatic Stress

- Chronic trauma refers to the experience of multiple frightening events.
- These may be many and they may be different. For example: A child sees their dad hit their mom. Then, they are all involved in a serious car accident. Next, the child becomes a victim of a drive-by shooting.
- The effects of chronic trauma add up over time. Each event serves to remind them of past trauma. This then strengthens the negative impact of such events.



# Types of Traumatic Stress

- Complex trauma happens when you add together “Chronic Trauma” and its effect on the child. It is often made worse by their caregivers because they are either the source of their pain, or do not help them through it.
- Children who have been through “complex trauma” have usually endured these events from a very young age.
- This type of trauma has serious effects on nearly every aspect of a child’s development and functioning.



# Other Sources of Ongoing Stress

- Foster children frequently face other sources of ongoing stress :
  - Poverty
  - Discrimination
  - Separations from parent/siblings
  - Frequent moves
  - School problems
  - Traumatic grief and loss



# Effects of Trauma Exposure

- When trauma is the result of failing to protect and nurture the child, it has serious and long term effects on the child's life. It is especially harmful because those doing the harm are the very people the child **trusts** the most.
- Children who experience this kind of trauma and then end up in foster care, usually have problems and delays with:



# Effects of Trauma Exposure

- **Attachment:** Traumatized children feel that the world is not safe because they never know what will happen next. They might end up alone a lot and can have a hard time feeling close to, or understanding the feelings of others.
- **Biology:** They may have problems with movement and sensation. They might be extra sensitive to physical contact but not feel much pain. They may have unexplained physical symptoms and increased medical problems.
- **Mood issues:** These children can have problems controlling their emotions. They also have a hard time understanding and describing/labeling their feelings.



# Effects of Trauma Exposure

- **Dissociation:** Some traumatized children experience a feeling of being disconnected from themselves. It is as if they are “observing” something happening to them and it doesn’t feel *real*.
- **Behavioral control:** When these children have a desire to do something, they have a hard time holding themselves back. They also might do things that end up hurting themselves or others.
- **Cognition:** They can have problems focusing on and completing tasks. They also have problems planning for future events. Some have problems with learning and language.
- **Self-concept:** These children often suffer from a distorted body image, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt.

# Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma



- Without good ways to cope, children who have been through trauma may take on risky or destructive coping behaviors. Examples: drug use, sex, etc.
- These behaviors place them at risk for serious mental and physical health problems, including:
  - Alcoholism
  - Drug abuse
  - Depression
  - Suicide attempts
  - Sexually transmitted diseases
  - Heart disease, cancer and liver disease



# Trauma and the Brain

- Trauma can have a serious impact on the normal development of children's brains. It can alter the chemicals in their brain and nervous system.
- Changes in the way our bodies handle stress can cause harm to the growing brain. It also can cause delays learning and language.
- These children show changes in the levels of stress hormones similar to those seen in war veterans.
  - These chemical changes may affect the way their brain responds to future stress in their lives and may also negatively impact their health for many years to come.



# Trauma and the Brain

- In **early childhood**, trauma can be linked with the reduced size of the brain.
  - This most important part of the brain affected is responsible for many complex functions, including memory, attention, thinking and language.
- Trauma may affect the “talking” between the two sides of the brain.
  - These changes may affect IQ and the ability to control emotions. This can lead to increased fearfulness and a sense that the world is not safe.



# Trauma and the Brain

- In **school-age children**, trauma weakens brain areas that would normally help children:
  - Control fears, anxieties, and aggression
  - Keep up attention for learning and solving problems
  - Control impulses
  - Manage stress
- As a result, children may have:
  - Sleep issues
  - New problems with learning
  - A hard time controlling startle reactions
  - Behavior that shifts between overly fearful and overly aggressive



# Trauma and the Brain

- In teenagers, trauma can interfere with the growth of the area of the brain that is in charge of:
  - Thinking about the impact of their behavior
  - Knowing when they are in danger and when they are safe
  - Ability to control behavior and meet future goals
- As a result, they are at increased risk for:
  - Behavior that puts themselves or someone else in danger
  - School failure
  - Poor choices
  - Aggressive or criminal behaviors



# The Influence of Developmental Stage

- A child's reaction to trauma may be affected by their age.
- They spend a lot of energy coping with, and coming to terms with the trauma.
- This may decrease a child's ability to explore their world and master certain skills.
- The longer the traumatic stress goes without help, the more likely the child will not master these skills.



# The Influence of Developmental Stage:

## Young Children

- Young children may:
  - Become passive, quiet, and easily alarmed. Their brain does not yet have the ability to quiet their fears.
  - Become scared, especially if you leave them or take them into new situations.
  - Become confused about knowing what/who is a threat and how to find protection. This is especially true if their parent was a threat.
  - Regress (e.g., baby talk, bed-wetting, crying).
  - Have strong startle reactions, nightmares or aggressive outbursts.



# The Influence of Developmental Stage: School-Age Children

- School-Age children may:
  - Have unwanted thoughts and images in their mind.
  - Will think about the frightening moments of the trauma over and over again. They do this to figure out how they could have stopped it or done something different.
  - Develop intense new fears that link back to the original danger.
  - Be shy one minute and aggressive the next.



# The Influence of Developmental Stage: School-Age Children

- **School-age children** may also:
  - Be scared of it happening again and avoid activities they used to enjoy.
  - Have angry thoughts about getting even.
  - Have difficulty sleeping that then makes it hard to pay attention and learn.



# The Influence of Developmental Stage: Teenagers

- In response to trauma, **teens** may feel:
  - That they are weak, strange, childish, or “going crazy”
  - Embarrassed by their fear or physical responses
  - That they are alone in their pain and suffering
  - Anxiety and depression
  - Intense anger
  - A sense of helplessness and experience low self-esteem



# The Influence of Developmental Stage: Teenagers

- These trauma reactions may in turn lead to:
  - Aggressive behavior
  - Problems sleeping which are hidden by studying late at night, watching TV, or partying
  - Using drugs and alcohol to cope
  - Poor judgment
  - Expecting others to treat them bad or leave them
  - Having a hard time trusting others
  - Increased risk of being a victim again, especially if they have lived with chronic or complex trauma



# What Can You Do?

- Know that almost all foster care children have been exposed to some form of trauma.
- Know the signs and symptoms of traumatic stress and that they vary by age.
- Know that children's "bad" behavior is sometimes a learned response to trauma.
- Understand the impact of trauma on development.
- Understand the effects when trauma gets heaped on more trauma.



# What Can You Do?

- Be open to seeing the trauma that you might have experienced and how it affects your relationship to children and your own happiness. Seek help working through this if needed.
- Understand that the system can either worsen or improve the effects of trauma.
- Lessen the risk of system-induced secondary trauma by serving as a protective and stress-reducing buffer for children:
  - Develop trust with children through listening
  - Spend time with them
  - Be open and honest with them
  - Avoid making promises that, if not kept, may make matters worse
  - Teach them relaxation skills



# **The Impact of Trauma on Children's Behavior, Development, and Relationships**



# Goals for Helping Traumatized Children

1. Maximize the child's sense of safety.
2. Assist children in reducing overwhelming emotion.
3. Help children make new meaning of their trauma history and current experiences.



# Maximize the Child's Sense of Safety

- Traumatic stress overwhelms a child's feeling of safety. It can lead to a number of survival strategies for coping.
- Safety is not just about *physical* safety. Safety also includes *psychological* safety.
- A sense of safety is very important for a child's physical and emotional growth.
- When talking to children about painful things in their past, make sure they feel emotionally safe.



# Understanding Children's Responses

- Many children who have been through trauma are the same ones that have very difficult behaviors.
- Sometimes, we only think of these behaviors as “good” or “bad.” But, we forget that children’s behavior often shows us what they went through in the past.
- Most of these “bad” behaviors are really ways of coping they created to survive with an abusive or neglectful parent.



# Assist Children in Reducing Overwhelming Emotion

- Trauma can bring out powerful feelings of fear, anger and helplessness. This can make the child feel very overwhelmed.
- Overwhelming emotion may delay the development of self-regulation.
- Emotions experienced before they were able to talk may be very real for the child but hard to express with words.
- Trauma may be “stored” in the body as physical tension or health complaints.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: Understanding Trauma Reminders

- Children might come across people, places, or things that remind them of the past. When they do, they may experience intense feelings tied to the past trauma.
  - These “**trauma reminders**” can lead to behaviors that seem out of place. But they were appropriate, even helpful, at the time of the original trauma. Children might respond to a very general reminder, such as the color red or the sound of another child crying.
- Children who have experienced trauma may face many, many trauma reminders in a single day. So many, that the whole world seems dangerous and no adult seems deserving of trust.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: Understanding Children's Responses

- When placed in a new, "safe" setting, traumatized children may display behaviors that bring out in you some of the same reactions they got from their abusive caregivers.
  - For example, your foster child hits his sister, which makes you angry and want to lash out at the child.
- Just as these children's sense of themselves and others is often negative and hopeless, these behaviors can cause the new adults in their lives to feel negative and hopeless about the child.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: Understanding Children's Responses

- Children who engage in reenactments are **not aware** that they are choosing to repeat painful relationships. The behavior patterns have become ingrained over time because they:
  - Are familiar and helped the child survive in other relationships.
  - “Prove” the child’s negative beliefs and expectations (a predictable world, even if negative, may feel safer than an unpredictable one).
  - Help the child vent frustration, anger, and anxiety.
  - Help the child feel they can **control** the old traumas.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: Understanding Children's Responses

- Traumatized children may also show:
  - Behavior that is too controlled as a way to combat feelings of helplessness.
    - ✓ They have difficulty moving between activities.
    - ✓ They find it hard to change routine.
    - ✓ They show inflexible behaviors, repetitive behaviors, etc.
  - Behavior that is not controlled enough, due to cognitive delays or problems with planning and organizing.
    - ✓ They behave impulsively.
    - ✓ They have problems with disorganization.
    - ✓ They have problems with delaying their need for something.
    - ✓ They might be aggressive and act-out.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: Understanding Children's Responses

- These children have unhealthy ways of coping. This can lead to behaviors that damage healthy relationships and may disrupt foster placements. These may include:
  - Sleeping and eating problems
  - Bed wetting
  - High energy, irritability, acting out
  - Emotional distance, not being responsive, or seeming numb
  - Feeling that danger is present, even when it isn't
  - Mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety)
  - An unexpected and exaggerated response when told "no"



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: What You Can Do

- You already have the ability to calm and reassure these children. Do this as much as possible! This is extremely important for lowering their stress level. This in turn improves their behavior.
- Learn as much as you can about the reasons for, and techniques to manage, children's emotional outbursts.
- Let the child's caregivers and caseworkers know that they can call STAR Health and ask the Service Management Team to identify mental health resources in their area.



# Reduce Overwhelming Emotion: What You Can Do

- Work with the child to identify and label troubling emotions. Let them know that the emotions are normal and understandable. This sounds simple, but can go a long way to lowering their stress level.
- Give children choices. Often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos. You can help children feel safe by providing them with some choices or control.
- Increase the level of support and encouragement given to the child.

# Help Children Make New Meaning of their Trauma History and Current Experiences



- ❖ Trauma can be a serious barrier to a child feeling safe and knowing who they are inside.
- ❖ It can also lead to crossed connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This can interfere with the way memories are laid down in their brains.
- ❖ Difficulty talking about the trauma may lower the child's confidence. This in turn lessens their desire and ability to be social.
- ❖ If you have an ongoing relationship to a child, you can help them build an understanding of their traumatic experiences.



# Make new meaning of Trauma History: What You Can Do

When Appropriate:

- ❖ Listen to and acknowledge the child's traumatic experience(s).
- ❖ Provide a safe place for the child to talk about what happened. Set aside a designated time and private place for sharing to help the child know it is okay to talk about what happened.
- ❖ Give simple and realistic answers to the child's questions about traumatic events. When possible, clarify distortions and misunderstandings. If it isn't a good time, be sure to give the child a time and place to talk and ask questions.
- ❖ Help the child in the development of a Life Book (i.e., a book of stories and memories about the child's life).



# Additional Ways You Can Help

- ✓ Be sensitive to the cues that may cause a reaction in the child. Children may increase problem behaviors near an anniversary of a traumatic event, before/after visitations with relatives etc.
- ✓ Anticipate difficult times and provide extra support. This might involve spending more time with them, checking in with them and providing extra nurturing moments. Many kinds of things may be trauma reminders. If you are able to identify reminders, you can help by preparing the child for the situation. Share these with the foster parents/caregivers.
- ✓ Warn children if you will be doing something out of the ordinary, such as making a sudden loud noise or changing the place of your visit. This is especially true when you are first getting to know a child.



# Additional Ways You Can Help

- ✓ Understand that children cope by acting out the trauma through play or through their interactions with others. Resist their efforts to draw you into a negative repetition of the trauma. For instance, some children will provoke you into a fight in order to replay abusive situations at home. This might also happen between siblings.
- ✓ Be aware of other children's reactions to each other. Remember that although some children might easily talk about their trauma, this could upset another child in the household. Keep in mind every child needs to feel psychologically safe to heal.



# Additional Ways You Can Help

- ✓ When a child is very angry or out of control, all your efforts should be about helping them calm down. This can be done through listening and supporting their emotions. This can also be done by taking a walk or doing a quiet activity together. It is the adult closeness and calmness that helps the child to calm down. Remember that the brain is “off-line” when upset and nothing will change until the brain is calm again.
  
- ✓ The most powerful way to change behavior is through:
  - **forming strong relationships**
  - **creating attuned communication**
  - **helping the child feel better about themselves**
  - **modeling and teaching emotion management skills**



# Assessment and Treatment of Trauma



# Overview

- Trauma affects many areas of a child's life and can lead to secondary problems.
- They could be having trouble in school and with relationships. They could also be having problems with their health.
- These extra problems may cover up symptoms of the underlying trauma. This can interfere with the child healing from their original trauma.



# Assessing Trauma

- Trauma assessments can discover likely risk behaviors (danger to self or others).
- A complete assessment can help spot the way a child reacts and how his or her behaviors are linked to the past trauma.
- Not all children who have been through trauma need trauma-specific therapy.
- Some children have amazing natural resilience and are able to use their support system to help heal.



# Evidenced-Based Treatment

- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
- Abuse-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (AF-CBT)
- Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP)

*There are many different evidence-based trauma-focused treatments. Call STAR Health and speak to a Service Coordinator or Service Manager to find resources in your area.*



# Managing Personal Stress



# Overview

- Those that work with foster children have some of the most challenging and emotionally draining jobs out there!
- You may empathize with what the child has been through. Having feelings of helplessness, anger, and fear are common.
- Adults who have their own histories of childhood trauma—may be at a higher risk for having such reactions.



# Impact of Stress

- Trauma experienced while working in the role of helper has been described as:
  - Compassion fatigue
  - Secondary traumatic stress (STS)
  - Vicarious traumatization
- This kind of stress is caused by exposure to someone else's trauma.
- STS can disrupt lives, feelings, personal relationships. It can affect your overall view of the world.



# Managing Stress: What You Can Do

- ❖ Request regular supportive meetings with your supervisors and/or clinical staff.
- ❖ Use your peers! They certainly will understand what you are going through.
- ❖ Find a support system you trust. Even if you don't feel friends and family understand exactly what you are going through, let them nurture you. Use your support system for re-creation and grounding when things get tough.



# Managing Stress: What You Can Do

- ❖ Consider therapy for yourself. Working with these children often brings up feelings or memories you thought long buried. Be open to sharing these powerful emotions with someone who is trained to listen and support you.
  
- ❖ Practice stress management through:
  - meditation
  - prayer
  - conscious relaxation
  - deep breathing
  - exercise
  
- ❖ Find ways to soothe yourself everyday



# *Thank You!*

This training material is based on the “Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit” and other web based documents written by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://www.nctsn.org>.