

Adopting and Parenting a Child with a History of Trauma

Joycee Kennedy and Frank Bennett

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Raising a child changes your life, whether the child comes through birth, adoption, or the foster care system. Adopting a child with a history of trauma is particularly challenging. While we don't believe that we have answers to every problem of every family, we believe that the following principles will improve the lives of many families embarking on this journey.

Make the Child's Sense of Safety Your Priority

Provide consistent love and safety. You want to help your child feel safe regardless of his or her behavior at the moment. Once, Joycee's son announced that he was going to run away. Shortly thereafter, Joycee showed up in his room with a suitcase and started packing. He looked at her and asked, "What are you doing?" She said, "I'm going with you." This unexpected maneuver showed him that she was willing to do whatever it took to keep him safe. He didn't run.

Understand the Child's View

Children who've been adopted or brought to a family through the foster care system, especially those who have experienced trauma, may not share certain basic beliefs that other children share with their parents. They may have been moved from home to

home, been physically or sexually abused, or repeatedly been lied to and may not trust adults. More fundamentally, trauma may interfere with children's learning. When a situation reminds them of a traumatic situation, these children may become so anxious that they can't organize their thinking, can't take in new information, or may not even be able to remain in a situation to see how it develops. And they may not be able to describe in words what they are experiencing.

What Works for Other Children May Not Work for Your Child

Joycee's son told her once how important it was that she never let him down. On the other hand, when Frank's daughter by birth took tennis lessons, her parents frequently forgot to pick her up on time. This earned them some glares, which they felt they

deserved, but the relationship was not threatened. Children with histories of trauma may not have the confidence in the relationship that other children do, and the experience of being let down may make them so anxious that they cannot perceive an event as simply annoying rather than life-threatening.

Understand What Discipline Means

The threat of a parent's displeasure is probably the major factor inhibiting inappropriate behavior in children who are securely attached to their parents. That factor may not exist for a child with a trauma history who's been adopted. Physical discipline may recall memories of abuse and set off a chain of fear and anger. Deprivation of privileges may set off a power struggle that doesn't end. Much of the misbehavior of children who've been traumatized is due to their lack of self-control, self-calming abilities, and



everyday positive coping strategies. These skills need to be taught to the children before they will let go of troubling behaviors. For these children, rules must be crystal-clear and consistent. As the children's sense of safety and ability to care for themselves increases, the rules can become more flexible, but patience and repeated practice are needed before a child can feel safe with self-control.

Adjust Your Expectations

What other children can do, children with histories of trauma may not be able to do or may take much longer to learn. One young boy, when first placed in the new home, would retreat to a corner of the room when he met new people. With two years of coaching and practice, the boy learned to shake hands and introduce himself when he met new people. Without a caring relationship and extreme patience, this new pattern could not have been built.

Get Support

Parenting children with trauma histories is hard work. It may be possible to do it alone, but it isn't a good idea. Support can come from support groups, a therapist, family members, friends, colleagues, books, and other materials, or a combination of all of these. Spending time with other parents who have had similar experiences will help you realize that you are not alone. There are apt to be times when other children in the family are stressed and tested by their siblings. They will need support and help. The other children in the family may not greet the suggestion to enter therapy with enthusiasm, but persist. They need to have some understanding of what their sibling is going through and what the family can do to work better together.

Recognize That You Will Not Be Perfect

You will never be able to follow all the helpful advice you get. You will undoubtedly lose your temper at times or do other things that you later wish you hadn't. Relax, forgive yourself, and get ready to face another day.

Never, Ever Give Up

Your children may not do things in the time frame you have imagined for them. Children with histories of trauma, in particular, may take more time than other children to finish school, find work, establish relationships with family and friends, and learn to adapt to society's expectations. When Frank's son was 21, he was homeless and heavily involved in alcohol and drugs. Four years later, he had held down the same job for three years, owned a car, and was paying his rent on time. You never know when the love and concern you give a child may bear fruit.

