



## Tips for Parents & Caregivers of Children who have Experienced Trauma

By Bruce D. Perry, MD, Ph.D.

- 1. Nurture these children.** Be physical, caring and loving while being mindful that in some children touch may be associated with pain, torture or sexual abuse. In such cases, carefully monitor how they respond and act accordingly. Provide replacement experiences that should have taken place during their infancy, realizing that their brains are now harder to modify, requiring a more in-depth bonding experience to help develop attachment.
- 2. Try to understand the behaviors before punishment or consequences.** Learn about attachment, bonding, normal and abnormal development in order to develop useful behavioral and social interventions. Hoarding food, for instance, should not be viewed as stealing but as a predictable result of being food deprived during early childhood. Punishing this behavior will increase the child's sense of insecurity and ultimately the need to hoard food. Get help from professionals in order to implement a practical, useful approach to such behaviors.
- 3. Parent these children based on emotional age.** Abused and neglected children often are socially and emotionally delayed. When frustrated or fearful, they will regress so that a ten-year-old child may emotionally act as a two-year-old. Interact with them at their emotional level, parenting them as if they were two if they are tearful, frustrated and overwhelmed. Use soothing, non-verbal interactions, holding and rocking them while singing quietly.
- 4. Be consistent, predictable and repetitive.** Maltreated children are sensitive to changes in schedule, transitions, surprises and any new situation. Birthday parties, sleepovers, the start or end of a school year can be overwhelming. Be consistent, predictable and repetitive to increase feelings of safety and security.
- 5. Model and teach appropriate social behaviors.** Both model and narrate appropriate behavior with a play by play description, "I am going to the sink to wash my hands before dinner because..." Coach on ways to play and interact, explaining why another child might be upset if you take an object from them during a game. In cases of inappropriate physical contact behavior, gently guide with few words, relying on nonverbal cues.
- 6. Listen to and talk with these children.** Find and make time to stop, sit, listen and play with a child so that they will sense that you are there just for them. Use such moment to reach and teach about feelings. Instill the principles that all feelings are okay to feel, modeling healthy ways to act, exploring how others may feel and how they show their feelings. Help children to put words and labels to their feelings.
- 7. Have realistic expectations of the children.** A comprehensive evaluation by skilled clinicians can be helpful to define the skill areas of a child and areas where progress will be slower. Limit expectations accordingly.
- 8. Be patient with the child's progress and with yourself.** Adoptive parents may feel inadequate when love, time and efforts seem not to have any effect. Don't be hard on yourself, allotting patience for yourself as well as for your child.

**9. Take care of yourself.** Parents and caregivers cannot provide the consistent, predictable, enriching and nurturing care needed by traumatized children if they are depleted. Get rest and support. Respite care can be crucial.

**10. Take advantage of other resources.** Look for support groups for adoptive or foster families. Professionals with experience in attachment problems or with maltreated children can be very helpful. The earlier and more aggressive the interventions, the better.

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### RESOURCES

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