

Understanding Children and Families in Foster and Kinship Care

Trauma-Informed Practices for Early Care and Education

Children living in foster or kinship care bring unique experiences, relationships, strengths, and needs to early care and education settings. Children may have faced abuse, neglect, separation, instability, or trauma. Their caregivers and parents also navigate loss, stress, complex relationships, and system involvement.

Early educators may not know a child's full history, and they don't need to. Understanding foster and kinship care, trauma effects, and diverse perspectives helps educators look beyond behavior and respond with curiosity, empathy, and intention.

Understanding Kinship and Foster Care

Foster and kinship care offer children a safe alternative when parents can't care for them.

Kinship care involves relatives or others with a significant relationship and can be informal, voluntary, or formal through the child welfare system. **Foster care** is temporary and provides a safe setting while plans are made for reunification or permanent placement.

Regardless of placement type, separation from a primary caregiver is significant for a young child.

Infants and young children rely on familiar caregivers for safety, comfort, and regulation, so relationship disruptions are particularly significant to understand.

Children and families involved in foster or kinship care may also be coping with multiple sources of adversity. Their experiences should not define them or determine what educators expect of them.

Recognize Trauma Responses

When children feel threatened or overwhelmed, their stress-response system may activate automatically. Behaviors that appear challenging may be attempts to protect themselves or regain a sense of safety.

Common Trauma Responses

- **Fight:** becoming aggressive, reactive, resistant, or controlling.
- **Flight:** avoiding, running away, or withdrawing.
- **Freeze:** shutting down, becoming passive, or appearing disconnected.
- **Tend or befriend:** clinging to others, closely monitoring adults, or taking responsibility for caring for others.

Children interpret new situations through the lens of past relationships. A child who finds adults frightening or unavailable may expect a new caregiver to act similarly, leading them to misread facial expressions, anticipate rejection, or test whether an adult is trustworthy.

See Behavior as Communication

A trauma-informed approach looks beyond the behavior itself and considers what the child may be communicating.

Instead of asking, "How do I stop this behavior?" consider, "What might this behavior be communicating?"

Behavior that seems aggressive, withdrawn, overly independent, clingy, or controlling may be a coping mechanism from earlier experiences. Understanding this doesn't mean ignoring unsafe behavior; it helps educators address both the behavior and its underlying need.

Questions to consider

- What might the child be feeling or expecting?
- Could something have activated the child's stress response?
- Is the child overwhelmed or unable to regulate in this moment?
- What might the child need from a caring adult?

Consider Developmental Needs

Children in foster or kinship care may experience developmental concerns, especially in language and social-emotional skills, which can vary widely. A child might excel in one area but struggle in another, such as being independent with self-help skills yet hesitant to ask for help or accept comfort.

Educators should adjust expectations to meet developmental needs rather than solely based on age.

Consider Multiple Perspectives

Children in foster and kinship care are surrounded by people who may experience the same situation very differently.

Foster and kinship caregivers may feel deeply responsible for a child while having limited control over decisions made by child welfare or the courts. They may also be managing appointments, visitation, grief, family conflict, and uncertainty about the future.

Birth parents may be experiencing their own trauma, loss, substance use, mental health concerns, poverty, housing instability, or other challenges. Most parents, including those involved with the child welfare system, want to be the best parents they can be.

Early childhood educators also bring their own beliefs, experiences, and emotional reactions to these relationships. Recognizing feelings such as protectiveness, frustration, anger, or helplessness can help educators respond intentionally rather than react.

Respect Culture, Identity, and Family

Culture shapes beliefs on parenting, family, expectations, and caregiving. Racial and historical trauma can impact children and families in the child welfare system. Educators can support by staying curious about differing perspectives and practices.

Additional Resources

[A Guide to Toxic Stress](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resource-guides/guide-toxic-stress/)

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resource-guides/guide-toxic-stress/>

[The Science of Neglect](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief/inbrief-the-science-of-neglect/)

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