

SAFE AND SOUND:

Responding to the Experiences of Children Adopted or in

Foster Care A Guide for Adults Involved in My Child's Life

Children who have been adopted or who are in foster care can grow up very healthy and happy.

But some have had a lot of hard things happen to them.

Trauma is one word used for those hard things. Science is just starting to explain how trauma hurts the bodies and brains of kids. If you learn more about what trauma does and how to be supportive and nurturing, you will be better able to help these kids.

Young brains grow best when children are safe and loved.

If a child feels safe and loved, everything she sees, hears, and touches will help her learn and grow in a healthy way. But if a child is scared, or if she experiences too much trauma, her brain and body can't grow in the same healthy way. A child who isn't safe has to learn ways for her body and brain to deal with fear. This is called toxic stress.

Many children who have been adopted or are in foster care have had lots of early trauma and toxic stress. These hard things might not be written down, and the details may have been lost over time. Even though the child is safe and loved now, the toxic stress from the past can still cause problems. That's why it is so important to think about the effects of trauma, even if you don't know exactly what happened to a child before you met her.

Fear tells the body that it needs to freeze, run, or fight to stay safe. When scary things happen often, the body gets used to being in that state: ready to freeze, run, or fight. The child's brain makes sure that she doesn't forget what happened. This is why a child may act like she is still not safe, even though she really is safe now. She may have trouble paying attention. She may not sleep well. She may fight a lot or have big tantrums.

It's important to understand that, if the child were really in danger, these behaviors could help keep her safe. But when the child is safe with you, it may look like she is just "being bad." If you know that she is acting that way because her body learned to do that when she was scared in the past, then it will be easier to help the child. How the adults around these kids react can make a big difference in helping them.

Here's what we know from science: Kids who have lived through trauma need different kinds of support from their parents and teachers than other kids do. In fact, if adults react like they usually do for most kids, it can make things worse, not better—even if the adult means well.

Children who have had trauma often need more help from adults to deal with their feelings of frustration and anger. They also need those adults to remain very calm and not to take things personally.

There are links to guides for parents, teachers, and others who care for children available at:

www.aap.org/safe&sound

These guides share some useful strategies for helping these kids recover and thrive.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this form in print format for noncommercial purposes. Material must be reproduced exactly as originally published. No deletions, alterations, or other changes may be made without the written consent of the AAP. For permission to reproduce material for commercial use or in formats other than print, please contact the AAP directly at permissions@aap.org.

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



Dave Thomas
Foundation
for Adoption®

Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care



JOCKEY
BEING FAMILY.