

Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

January / February 2023

N F A P A

HOW CAN YOU WASTE THE BEST YEARS OF YOUR LIFE FOSTERING CHILDREN?' PEOPLE QUESTIONED IF I'D FIND A HUSBAND.': SINGLE FOSTER MOM SAYS 'THESE CHILDREN ARE WORTH IT'

by Nicole Gaven

If you would have asked me ten years ago, as I was graduating from high school, how I envisioned my life going, this was NOT it. Being in my late 20s as a single foster parent, whose idea was that? Not 18-year-old me, that is for sure.

Becoming a single foster parent is one of the most life-changing, rewarding, difficult decisions of my life. It wasn't something I thought about lightly but I did decide to do it after one moment. I worked at a children's hospital for five years as a trauma nurse and forensic nurse. I saw numerous amount of children who were abused, neglected, and drug-exposed. People had mentioned to me that I should become a foster parent since these children always touched my heart.

I always had an excuse. 'I am too busy. I work two jobs. I am getting my Master's degree.' However, one specific patient changed everything, and that night, I went home and signed up to be a foster parent.

People's reaction to me becoming a single foster parent

was not what I expected. I received so much positivity and encouragement but also negativity. People could not understand why, as a single young adult, I would ever do something like this.

People questioned if I would ever find a husband. 'How can you waste the best years of your life?' 'You won't be able to make a difference.'

How do you explain to people this is what God called you to do? These comments did not stop me and I continued through the process. After three months of classes, loads of paperwork, and home studies, I became a licensed foster parent.

The news came the day before my 27th birthday. Two days after becoming licensed, I received a call

for a placement. A five-year-old girl who needed to be placed. Without thinking, I said yes and within an hour, I was on my way to pick her up. The first two weeks were busy with trying to get into a new routine of things while still working full time. It seemed like I had gotten it easy. This little was sweet and polite, and everything seemed to be going smoothly. At the time, I did not know but this is what foster parents call the 'honeymoon phase.'



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Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association

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Call NFAPA at 877-257-0176 or 402-476-2273.

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Attention Foster Parents!

Earn Your In-Service Hours While Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to Corinne@nfapa.org, send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JanuaryFebruary2023> We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

1. Fill in blank. When you are feeling overwhelmed too often with family dynamics, it's time to seek _____.
2. True or False. Sleep and nutrition are not major factors in how children tolerate stress and process their feelings.
3. True or False. It's important to enter the fostering process with an authentic willingness to support reunification.
4. Fill in blank. The reality of foster care is that it's much more complex than just _____ and finding it hard to say goodbye.
5. True or false. Stress can be a good thing. A small amount of stress focuses attention and enhances performance.
6. Fill in blank. Maintaining our ability to _____, _____ and empathize is the key to whether we overcome the challenge or whether adversity defeats us.
7. True or false. Just like a house can't be built on a weak foundation, parents can't thrive at work and at home without nurturing and maintaining their inner selves.
8. Fill in the blanks. The inability to manage _____ can be a serious problem.
9. True or false. Studies show that students of color are more likely to be treated as behavior problems than white students.
10. Fill in the blank. The first step in distinguishing what's causing a child's behavior is to consider their _____.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone #: _____

(Continued from page 1)

Three weeks later, the honeymoon phase came to an end abruptly and it seemed like too much one person could handle. Behaviors started to appear that weren't there before, weekly visits needed to occur, appointments needed to be made, and hourly long tantrums started to happen. It was overwhelming and I questioned why I even decided to do this in the first place. Even with my self-doubt, I pushed on and days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. I ended up switching to a job that allowed me to be home more often to spend on my foster daughter. After five months, the sweet little girl was reunited with her father and my first foster placement journey came to an end.

I decided I was going to take a few months off from fostering. During that time, it seemed like my normal life was back. Even though I was enjoying doing things I loved and sleeping in, the calling to foster again came back. I decided I was not ready for a full-time placement so decided to provide respite care for other foster families. I did not expect to meet a 3-year-old girl who would completely change my life.

The sweet little 3-year-old was up for adoption and her current placement was unable to adopt her. When I went into foster care, I told myself I would not adopt any children because if I did, I would end up adopting them all. But maybe, just maybe, I would break my own rules and adopt her. I called the placement center and requested information on her but what they said was not what I expected. This sweet little three-year-old also had a two-year-old sister, and they were looking to have them adopted together. I couldn't help but think, how could I adopt not one but two little girls?

For the next 6 weeks, the girls came and stayed with me every weekend. It looked as if I was going to be adopting them. However, God had different plans and DCS found a placement that was adoption certified. Just like that, the two little girls were gone.

This was heartbreaking to me. In 6 weeks, I made a strong connection with the girls. After they left, I did not think I would foster again. I decided to take another couple of months off and see where my heart was. After a lot of praying, I decided to reopen my home. Within 20 minutes of being placed back on the list, I received multiple phone calls. It took me two days to say yes to a little two-year-old boy with health issues.

So here I am a year later, on my fourth placement. I am so glad I decided to drown out the noise of others. Foster care is hard. Foster care takes dedication. Foster care can be overwhelming. Foster care takes sacrifice. Foster care can break your heart. But even in the brokenness, these children are worth it. They are worthy of love, compassion, and someone they can depend on. At the end of the day, I do not regret my decision to become a foster parent. I know 18-year-old me would be proud my life turned out nothing like I

planned. I may not be able to help all the children but I can help one. And to that one, it could mean everything.

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https://www.lovewhatmatters.com/how-can-you-waste-the-best-years-of-your-life-fostering-children-people-questoned-if-id-find-a-husband-single-foster-mom-says-these-children-are-worth-it/?fbclid=IwAR2pz0kpUgzW2st4QJz5uFmsLVJYG8FNbpS9cze_PqUaY7YvcplwTzj0Qjov



FOSTERING SIBLING BONDING: HOW TO SET THEM UP FOR SUCCESS

by Shay Stinson

Sick of constant bickering? Is the sibling competition in your house driving you crazy? You're far from alone. When your children are generally peaceful, respectful of each other and loving, this makes your job as their parent way more rewarding and enjoyable. When they bicker constantly? The opposite is true.

As an in-home therapist, parenting coach, and mom of four, I have found that a few key principles help support sibling bonding from the start...

1. Get older siblings invested from the beginning. During pregnancy, read aloud weekly emails that provide the update of your baby's development. Make it a special time when your older child can learn about the process and growth of your developing baby. When older siblings feel that they are an important part of the team that is raising the new baby, they will naturally be protective and take pride in

their responsibility in this role.

2. Let your older children help as much as they want. Maybe your three year old can't actually help with bathing a newborn, but he or she can go get the clothes you picked out and bring them to you. Take time to answer questions about breastfeeding and other topics related to this special time.

3. Be honest with yourself about your older child's development and don't push them to grow up too soon. But don't short-change them either. Sometimes moms who are preoccupied with a new baby can become a bit too permissive with the older child to try to make up for the guilt the mom experiences. Loving limits must be in place to continue the learning and growth of your older child as he or she needs structure and boundaries (as well as affection and understanding) to thrive.

4. Take time to listen to your older child(ren). They may have some feelings that are difficult to deal with during times of transition- such as bringing a new baby home. You can listen to them without feeling like you need to fix it and make everything better. Acknowledging the feeling with a simple comment like "I know, it's been hard for Mommy too," and a hug, can be the moment of connection that helps.

5. Model peaceful, positive communication with your partner. Siblings learn how to cooperate by watching you. If tempers are running hot with adults in the home and there is unresolved tension, children are going to take that in and inevitably act out their anger and frustration in unhealthy ways. Calming, cleansing breaths can be a simple way to work through a difficult moment if stress is keeping you from seeing straight and thinking clearly. If you model these relaxation breaths with your children and explain how to do it, they can practice with you and use this as a tool when they become upset with siblings. Using strategies like this will support you being able to get moments to yourself as the kids get older because they will be able to play harmoniously (not perfectly, but generally peacefully). I'm not saying don't argue (because we all do); just be sure that your kids see there's a resolution and forgiveness.

6. Sleep and nutrition are major factors in how children tolerate stress and process their feelings. A consistent sleep routine for each child will support their best behavior and ability to cope with difficult feelings when a situation arises.

7. Take time to help siblings understand each other. Currently, I have a 14 year old, 7 year old, 2 ½ year old, and a baby who is almost one year. The 7 year old understands that he must be patient and that his younger siblings do not know how to share yet, nor do they intend to hurt him if they bop him on the head. Our toddler is learning to say he's sorry and starting to grasp the concept that other people have feelings that he can affect. This is something I spell out to my older children so they can help him practice and they can

show empathy when he may be struggling with an impending meltdown. There is a sense of shared experience that fosters community and support amongst siblings when these things are spelled out.

8. Avoid comparing siblings and DO treat them as individuals. Children can be very different in temperament, sensitivities, demeanor, talents, style of learning, and preferred method of receiving affection. These are just some factors to pay attention to when trying to meet their needs appropriately and avoiding often-dreaded sibling rivalry.



9. Focus on quality of time versus quantity. Especially for working parents, it can be challenging to find enough time with the kids so we may neglect our own needs in order to get every second possible before bedtime. Out of the desperation, we can become impatient, resentful, and not very pleasant to be around, therefore creating a bigger issue. A more targeted "together" time of 15 minutes over a stressful 30 minutes will be better received and appreciated. They you can spend the other 15 minutes recharging your batteries, refilling your cup, and any other euphemism you want to visualize. The important part is: self-care for parents supports better parent-child relationships and therefore sibling relationships! It's all connected.

11. Watch out for repeating unhealthy family patterns. Self-awareness and reflection on our own childhood is essential to creating a healthy environment for our children to thrive. Most of us did not come from an idyllic family and often becoming a parent can bring up unresolved issues from the past. Knowing your story and being able to select what you want to carry on, versus what you want to leave behind, will support your ability to have the family you want.

12. When you are feeling overwhelmed too often with family dynamics, it's time to seek support. Find a therapist or parent coach in your area to talk to about what you're experiencing. You don't have to feel

alone and often the acknowledgement of needing a little help is the most important step to improved family satisfaction.

10. When in doubt, LAUGH. Juggling more than one child will sober up any formidable super-mom or dad! Don't take yourself too seriously and let your kids remind you to loosen up.

You don't have to accept sibling rivalry as a fact of life. Many parents are passive about how their children relate to each other because they think "that's how kids are." Taking a proactive role in supporting loving interactions between siblings and appreciation for each other can make parenting that much more rewarding. I take solace in knowing that when I'm gone, my four sons will be there to support each other—in part because their father and I set things up that way.

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<https://www.scarymommy.com/sibling-bonding?fbclid=IwAR2XgIPYIjM4ZfEN8nrWRYcjal3CGMCBHA7PAhqOR9Ihr5Fyr6Z3RsY628s>

'SHE BURIES HER HEAD SOBBING, PLEADING, 'DON'T LET ME GO.': MOM EXPLAINS TRUE MEANING OF FOSTERING CHILDREN.'

by Sophia Philippov

How To Say Goodbye

"I could never do that. I'd love them too much. I wouldn't be able to say goodbye."

Too many times to recall, the response to me being a foster carer is met with some version of, 'I could never do that. I'd love them too much. I could never say goodbye.'

A knife through the collective heart of foster carers everywhere. Because actually, it's much harder than you think.

First, let me tell you, you will love them, and you will love them hard.

It will pain you to hear them cry...just as it did your own because you want the hurt to end the moment they are in your arms. It will pain you to see them struggle to make a friend at school because you know they have so much love to give to another, and it will pain you to not be able to breastfeed the newborn...because you so desperately want to be able to give something of yourself to them.

And as your time with them rolls on, you realize...when you hear yourself talking about them at the end of a long and tricky day...when you see them faced with seemingly impossible expectations they're used to just riding....when you remember

reading details of the removal – the turmoil they have faced and the trauma that has wounded their essence – the love you have will soar for them.

And when it settles, it will do so in a much deeper place than you would ever have imagined possible. But that's not even the part that hurts. It's the, 'I wouldn't be able to say goodbye' part.

The thing is, you just can't foster to adopt. It's important to enter the fostering process with an authentic willingness to support reunification. You are temporarily looking after children who cannot reside at home for a period of time.

So, we all know we will be saying goodbye to the children who come into our care. That doesn't make it easy for us. In fact, it's much harder than you think.

As a foster carer, you are stepping into a commitment that will inevitably see your biological children suffer. You are basically allowing your own children – encouraging them – to form a loving relationship with a sibling who you know will leave them.

You are modeling for them ways to fast-track knowing this little person on a much deeper level than they know their school friends or cousins, and all the while, you know that one day, sooner or later, they will be helping you pull down the books from the shelf that belong to them.

They will be helping you slide photos into an album of the camping trip you all took together and they will be helping you remember which scooter is theirs so that you pack the right one.

Basically, you are setting your biological children up for heartbreak.

When you say, 'I would never be able to say goodbye,' next time picture this:

Lying on a single bed and facing into her, she wants to bury her head into her little sister's soul. Her sobbing cries rise and fall from desperate to heartbreak to regret to confusion. Her fair-skinned limbs wanting to merge into one being with her charcoal-skinned sister, begging, pleading, with me not to let her go.

She is hugging everything she grew to love about her. Everything she wanted their lives to be together. Everything they had already built.

I know that, give it a year or maybe a bit less, she will stop asking.

Stop asking for the girl she knew as her sister. She'll stop pleading to invite her over. She'll stop wondering out loud about how her day was at school, about whether she still uses her dollhouse, about whether she has learned how to swim now.

She'll stop, but it's not because she will forget. She'll never forget her now. She was with us too long for her to merge into the others. She'll stop asking because she knows that she had to say goodbye.

That she always has to say goodbye.

It's much harder than you think.

The Time After Reunification

When a child you have loved and cared for as your own is reunified, you sit at home, and the room is quiet.

Every room is quiet, even though the chatter and the

television and the kettle boiling. It's just quiet.

It's not unlike a death.

You doze off in an exhausted but light and unsure sleep, only to be startled to wake by a noise that you thought was familiar. 'Where is,' ...and then you remember, 'Oh, that's right.' You need to remind yourself that the child went home.



For a while, all you can think about is them. There is a piece of your heart, of your whole being, missing. And it will always be that way, varying in intensity. You rush through dinner, longing for the still, longing for dark, so you can be alone in your thoughts. But then you can't help but wonder. What they must be thinking.

Does she think I just got sick of her? Maybe that she cried too much? Or that she stopped being cute? Does she think that I didn't really like her in the first place? And that she wasn't really wanted after all? Then, you go a little further.

You wonder if they will call out for you in the dark stillness of night before their room becomes familiar. You wonder if they will find comfort in the familiar smell of their teddy before it gets washed again. And you wonder if they look for you, trying to recognize you in the people around them now. You wonder if they will try to write to you when they are a little older and want to make contact again. And then, you wonder if they will remember you at all.

As the weeks pass and you haven't heard from or about them, all you can do is cling to the hope that they don't need you anymore. That they don't need help anymore. That they are safe, and happy, and cared for and forming attachments and getting bigger and stronger and that all is well in their world.

It's literally all you can do.

It's much harder than you think.

Time rolls on. Your family feels a little fractured. And you remember that you have never actually felt whole since you decided to be a foster parent. Even with the busiest of households, there will forever be children missing at the dinner table. You will always miss carrying that sweet babe out of her cot. And even with the most beautiful of family photos, there will be faces lingering in the spaces around the people who remain.

It's about now that we foster carers question ourselves, question if it's all worth it. And we feel more aligned with your response. Maybe I do love them too much. Maybe it really is just too hard to say goodbye. Maybe...none of it really makes sense at all. And down the rabbit hole, we go.

Why can't we just do the things that normal people do? Have babies, care for our own, not expose our children to the reality of abuse and neglect and pain upon pain. Why can we just live a life in relative safety, not being confronted by and tasked with holding space for children with trauma? Why can't we just turn a blind eye?

Forget about trauma, brain injuries, physical injuries, fetal alcohol, behavioral specialists, therapies, special needs, support teachers, learning plans, medication, sensory toys... sadness.

Tiredness.

It's much harder than you think.

Moving On From Grief

Carefully, I go into her bedroom. Everything is gone now; the toys, the clothes, the jewelry box with the little ballerina. I sit on the bed and listen to the memories of stories read, conversations had, questions asked, and hugs given. I run my hands over the wall and remember lying here, on the day I was waiting for her, full of strength and promises and hope and honor. And I let that sit.

Glancing up onto a shelf, I see a little blessings card deck. I don't remember changing the card in a while, I am not sure anyone else has either. I walk over to it and see that the one facing me says, 'A generous heart, a life of service... and compassion... are the things which renew humanity' (Buddhist teaching). I think about this for a while.

The reality of foster care is that it's much more complex than just loving children and finding it hard to say goodbye. It's much harder than that, and it's much more important than that. And slowly, through your hot salty tears and racing heart, I realize I am smiling.

This is where it's at. This is what it is about.

Because the thing is, once you know the need, truly know and witness the need, no longer can you shut your eyes to it.

Once you're a foster carer, and your heart is open (truly open) to meeting the children exactly where they're at. To intentionally and vulnerably choosing to join them in their pain, to walk beside them as they navigate their trauma, and to get up each morning and advocate for them in every aspect of their lives...you will never go back.

You can't un-hear the things they tell you. You can't unread the things that happened to them. Their need is too powerful

No longer a licensed foster parent? Folks leave for all sorts of reasons. We'd like to hear more about your experience-- and why you left-- so we can improve the foster parenting experience for those who follow.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Foster-Parent-Exit-Survey>



Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association Workshops

The Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association offers the following free in-service trainings to foster and adoptive parents. RSVP is required! Sign-up today.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPAIIn-Service-2023>

Virtual: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder from a Trauma Lens — 2 CEUs

January 21, 2023 9:00 am—11:00 am (Central Time) Barb Clark from North American Council on Adoptable Children

We are seeing high rates of children who have been prenatally exposed to alcohol, drugs and high levels of in-utero stress which can have a significant impact on the individual's brain development. Although Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) are twice as common as autism, this disorder often goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Children, adolescents and adults with an FASD have invisible brain injuries and typical parenting, teaching and therapeutic strategies are often ineffective. It is vital for anyone parenting, teaching or working with these individuals to understand the reasons behind the learning and behavioral challenges and to have an in-depth understanding of the strategies which are more effective with these neuro-behavioral differences.

Virtual: Transracial Parenting; We Must Do Better — 2 CEUs

February 25, 2023 9:00 am—11:00 am (Central Time) Barb Clark from North American Council on Adoptable Children

How do you parent a child of a different race than you are? Is love enough? We know it's not. It is crucial that foster and adoptive parents are aware of how race impacts children in America, even if a child is only in your home for a few days or a few weeks. Damage can be done unintentionally, so let's roll up our sleeves and dig deep into tough discussions, as that is when we can see the most growth, in times of discomfort.

In-Person: Helping You Support a Child You Are Fostering or Adopting — 6 CEUs

9:00 am—4:00 pm (Central Time) A break for lunch

Offered on two dates/locations: March 11, 2023: Grand Island or April 22, 2023: North Platte

- **Child Development:** build a basic foundation for understanding child development, so you can better understand and meet the child's needs.
- **Attachment:** discuss strategies to help you build your toolkit to enhance your relationship with the child you foster or adopt.
- **Separation, Grief & Loss:** tools and skills to help the child communicate and understand their loss and grief.
- **Effective Communication:** tools you can use to make your communications more effective, particularly during sensitive conversations with the child you are fostering or have adopted.

You must register to attend! We will send you the Zoom link to log in or location of in-person training. Registration closes the day before training.

Questions? Contact the Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association at 402-476-2273 or Corinne@nfapa.org

**Facilitated by the Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association
Sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services**



BE A SAFE SPACE FOR YOUR TEEN

by *Melissa Ford*

Teens have opinions; they're just looking for a safe space to express them. So be that safe space when it comes to discussions about sexuality. Whether they agree or disagree with you, the only way they'll feel confident making their own decisions is if you reinforce their power by helping them navigate their thoughts and feelings. Ask them how they're processing the sexual messages they're getting in popular culture, and help them understand their options for dealing with new, sexual feelings. Share your values and be okay if your teen disagrees. Just follow up by asking them about their values.

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<https://parentandteen.com/parenting-snack-be-a-safe-space/>

to not raise your hand to them.

I leave the room, slowly, and wander into the kitchen, again turning the kettle to boil. I look over to the couch and watch my children in the aftermath of this most recent saying goodbye. Yes, there is sadness. But also, I know.

Their eyes are open to what a meaningful life could look like. To what it means to live a life of service and compassion. And I think about how lucky they have been to show love to a child who thought they were unlovable, and to receive love from a child who learned how to give it. And to accept that in life, everything comes to an end, even if that end is heartbreakingly painful.

I know that in a few days' time, the phone will ring again.

I will listen to the request of this child new to me. I will feel into my heart and I will listen to my body's response. I hear the words, but also I know the request is more than if I have space in my home. More than if I have more love in my heart.

The request is if I am willing to go there again. If I am willing to love another too much while knowing that we will, again, have to say goodbye.

I say yes.

Even though it's much harder than you think. Because it's much more important than that."

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<https://www.lovewhatmatters.com/foster-care-parent-heartbreak-reunification/?fbclid=IwAR0BEXSJFJ7hwJblpFEJMXV5E-e-bJvxXil1KMMy2l0xQCwsnhHwCvEVirEI>

THE FIRST STEP TO MANAGE STRESS

By *Ken Ginsburg / Helping Teens Learn to Cope*

Stress Management: Learn to Identify What Causes Stress

When we teach our children healthy stress management techniques, we empower them to thrive in an unpredictable world. Stress affects mood and can cause physical discomfort. The actions we take to feel better can either help us grow stronger or damage our health, well-being, and even relationships. And one of the keys to taking effective action is helping teens understand what's causing the stress in the first place.

Stress is Not All Bad

Stress can be a good thing. A small amount of stress focuses attention and enhances performance. Genuinely life-threatening crises send the mind and body into survival mode. This literally saves lives by preparing us to connect to others, escape, and even fight when necessary.

The problem is that the body's stress-response system was not designed for today's world. Long ago — when people were jungle dwellers — having an emergency nervous system helped ensure survival. One never knew if a tiger might jump out and attack at any moment. If that were to happen, they thought about nothing but running away from it. There was no stopping to try and work things out with the tiger! When we generate the same response to a mild (not really dangerous!) stressor as we would to a true life or death emergency, it can be self-destructive. This is the reason understanding stress

management techniques is so critical to a teenager's short and long-term health and happiness.

Stress Biology 101

The stress response prepares our body so we can run from dangers we encounter. When it is fully activated we feel it immediately. We get butterflies as blood shifts to muscles so we can run. Our heart beats fast so it can pump the blood. Breathing intensifies so it can oxygenate that blood. We sweat to cool off. And our pupils dilate so we are less likely to trip as we run away.

During times of extreme stress we are not supposed to think or solve problems. After all, you wouldn't turn to a tiger and ask, "Can't we just work this out?" You run! Nor are you supposed to ask the tiger what it feels like for him to want to eat you. In times of maximal stress, we can't empathize or think clearly. This basic understanding of stress biology offers a starting point for being able to effectively guide our teens to manage stress.

Maintaining our ability to focus, problem solve, and empathize is the key to whether we overcome the challenge or whether adversity defeats us.

Have a Mindset of Resilience

There are some stressful events that require the strongest and most immediate reactions. Natural disasters. Dangerous people. A tiger on the prowl. There are other stressors for which deep feelings are a critical step towards healing. A death in the family. The loss of a cherished relationship. These real crises demand every drop of energy. The stress response system is designed to get us through these times.

But most crises are not life threatening. Arguments with friends. Grades. Even losing a job. If the stress response system is fully activated in reaction to these difficult but safe situations, it undermines our ability to get through them. In these cases, maintaining focus, problem solving, and empathy are each key to overcoming the challenge.



Save Energy

Resilient people conserve energy. They control how deeply stress gets under their skin. They do the hard work of preventing everyday stresses from being blown out of proportion. They focus when needed. They run when they should. We must remind our teens of this important tactic.

Avoid Catastrophic Thinking

Viewing a "threat" out of proportion to its real potential for danger is known as "catastrophic thinking." A person who experiences catastrophic thinking may be highly anxious and mistrustful. They may lose the focus, concentration, or social skills needed to resolve the issue. For these reasons, it is important to teach our children to reframe negative or catastrophic thoughts. We are not saying to paint everything through rose-colored glasses. Rather, we're saying an accurate, realistic assessment of a situation allows the situation to be handled with confidence.

Distorted or catastrophic thinking gives too much power to what might otherwise be a manageable situation. The simple suggestions provided here are rooted in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a well-tested strategy that shifts people to healthy thinking patterns. If you think you or your adolescent could use even more practice, consider looking for a professional who uses CBT to support clients.

Parents as Role Models

Your words will remain in your children's thoughts for years to come as they work to realistically assess challenges as the first step towards overcoming them. I often think of my grandmother's words. She'd always say "This too shall pass." Then with a twinkle in her eye she'd add, "With a sense of humor you can get through anything."

As critical as words may be, your wisdom is best shared through actions. By watching you, your children develop the "muscle memory" to make wise decisions. From you they learn that they can choose how to react. They learn how to control their thoughts, enabling them to remain calm even during moments of panic. And from you they can learn to gain composure when life feels out of control. Taking care of yourself, and actively demonstrating how you do so, is a strategic act of effective parenting.

Three Questions to Put Things in Perspective

Three questions can help control thinking and allow a situation to be viewed through a realistic lens.

Is this a real tiger or a paper tiger?

Is this problem temporary?

Is this good situation permanent?

Real Tiger or Paper Tiger

The mindset of resilience begins with the ability to distinguish real tigers from paper tigers — things that stress us out but pose no real danger. If we can't tell the difference between the two, our fight or flight system gets revved up, preventing us from using our ability to think, feel, and problem-solve. We are designed to run from tigers. And when we do, the thinking, rational part of the brain shuts down because this is the time to escape not negotiate. It is the time to flee, not feel.

The problem is sometimes we mount this efficient escape system in situations that stress us out, but are not threats to survival. When we do this, we lose the ability to think practically despite the fact that thinking offers the best chance of resolution.

If tweens or teens think getting a B+ on a test is a tiger, they'll never focus on the test. If they misread your disappointment

as a threat they'll never see your viewpoint. They should start with the question, "Is this a real tiger or a paper tiger?" Then learn to say to themselves, "No tiger here!" when there's no potential for real physical harm. "It's only a paper tiger." They can take a few deep breaths and restore calm. And then they can face a realistic challenge with focused attention and increased empathy.

Is This Problem Temporary?

When a problem strikes, many imagine it will lead to a larger problem or that the consequences will be far-reaching and long-lasting. We must teach our children to learn to ask themselves, "How will I feel in a week or even a month?" If the answer is, "I won't be upset about this," they can reassure themselves with the reminder, "This too shall pass." When your child is barely able to contain his/her worry, give comfort with the reassuring phrase "You'll get through this." With your words or continued presence communicate "I'll be by your side." In his book, *The Optimistic Child*, Martin E.P. Seligman, PhD, writes about the benefits of viewing problems as short-lived and resolvable.

Is This Good Thing Permanent?

Sometimes even when good things happen it can trigger anxiety. People may believe their luck will run out and they'll be overcome by a "fear of failure." Precisely because something good has happened they become anxious that they may not remain deserving and will lose their good fortune. This expectation of impending failure reinforces a lack of control.

In a self-defeating preemptive strike, some people may choose self-sabotage rather than take the chance they will be hurt later. We must work to make sure this isn't our children's first reaction.

Instead, remind them that good things can be permanent. Let them know they were deserving and earned the good circumstances they find themselves in. The challenge is to continue creating the circumstances where good things will come to them rather than assume they will be taken away.

The Power of Yet: A Word That Shows Change is Possible

Self-defeating thoughts often begin with words like "I never" or "I can't." This leaves no room for progress because hope is undermined. Help your children learn to add the transformative word "yet" to their thoughts. "I can't solve this problem" becomes, "I can't solve this problem yet." Hope restored. Now make an action plan.

We want our children to possess a mindset that doesn't accept failure as a permanent state but sees setbacks as opportunities to try yet again. Throughout their lives, we want them to see their limitations as challenges they have not yet learned to overcome or work around.

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NFAPA Support Groups

Foster parenting is hard. You face challenges as you parent children and youth with a trauma history that your friends and family do not understand.

Support groups can provide informal mutual support and opportunities to discuss parenting joys, challenges and strategies as you navigate the life of a foster parent.

- **Live Virtual Support Group:** Available the first Tuesday at 6:30 pm (MT). Contact Jolie at 308-672-3658 or Tammy at 402-989-2197 for the Zoom link. You must register to attend. January, February & March will be support only, no in-service training offered.
- **Faces:** Online Foster Parent Support Group Chat on Facebook: Meets Tuesday nights at 9:00 (CT). No CEU's or training. Contact Robbi at 402-853-1091. You must have a Facebook account.
- **Parenting Across Color Lines:** For multi-racial families on the fourth Monday of the month at 6:30 pm in-person in Lincoln. Contact Felicia at 402-476-2273 to register to attend.

MODELING BOUNDARIES FOR TEENS

by *Melissa Ford*

Pssst, don't look now but you are surrounded by teachable moments. They're in books, movies, television shows, and the news. They make for an easy way to get your child to think about how they'd react in a similar situation. Ask your teen how they would have responded if facing the same peer pressure. You can help them come up with an answer by being a role model. Show them how you push back against the daily barrage of advertisements and requests. Let them hear you say "no" sometimes, especially when that "no" means saying "yes" to something positive.

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THREE SELF CARE TIPS FOR PARENTS

by *Alison Gilbert*

Build a Better Parent Through Self-Care: Exercise, Proper Nutrition, and Rest

Think taking time for self-care is harder for you than it was for your parents, even your grandparents? You're not imagining it. Since 1965, mothers are spending nearly double the number of hours on childcare while fathers are spending almost four times the amount. These numbers highlight why it's more important than ever for parents to prioritize taking better care of themselves.

The inability to manage stress can be a serious problem. Parents may feel nervous, insecure, and fail to think clearly. Some may lose sleep and grow irritable. Others may get headaches or stomach aches. Building a stronger, healthier body is key to overall emotional and physical well-being. Just like a house can't be built on a weak foundation, parents can't thrive at work and at home without nurturing and maintaining their inner selves.

Parents don't have a lock on stress, however. Teens worry about grades and friends. They get anxious about their appearance and the future. Older teens may have concerns about terrorism, injustices and inequalities, even the economy. Above all, they worry about us. What often makes this so hard to manage is that they don't have the benefit of having lived through these challenges before. The best way parents can help teens navigate life's jagged terrain is to build

their capacity for resilience, in other words, to help them cope with stress. And knowing that your teen is able to cope helps lower your own stress levels as a parent or caregiver. Simply put: Of all lessons parents teach their children, passing along positive ways to manage stress is among the most essential.

So, how can parents take better care of their bodies, counter stress, and drive their capacity for resilience? Below are three essential tips:

Just like a house can't be built on a weak foundation, parents can't thrive at work and at home without nurturing and maintaining their inner selves.



1) Exercise Regularly

Exercise is one of the world's best medicines. It has the ability to transform anxiety and counter depression. Exercise is also known to heighten alertness and improve concentration. And you know what else? Working out may help us live longer, decreasing the risk of developing chronic illnesses like cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

Working out is healthful because it releases endorphins and other calming chemicals in the brain. It's this uptick that lifts our mood after we exercise. Ever heard of the expression, a "runner's high"? Exercise is also beneficial because of what it takes away – a hormone called cortisol. Too much cortisol leads to weight gain, high blood pressure, and heart disease. The amount of cortisol in our body increases after a stressful event. The good news is that exercise brings these levels down.

Exercise shouldn't be a source of stress in itself. What you choose to do isn't as important as doing something. Exercise doesn't have to be competitive. There's no need to run a race or play a full tennis match. Exercise should just be fun! Think walking, going for a hike, doing yoga, or heading to a lake for a swim.

Getting outside is a particularly good idea. Individuals who spend time in natural spaces tend to focus less attention on the negative aspects of their lives. Gretchen Daily, coauthor

of a study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, told me: “Never before have people been so detached from nature. At the same time, what we’re seeing is a pronounced increase in anxiety and mood disorders. . . . There is growing evidence, however, that reintroducing nature to people who are deprived of it can improve mood. Many individuals feel better in a natural setting, perhaps because it helps them let go of pain.” And if you don’t live where there is much greenery, look up. See the sky and follow the clouds. Find a patch of green. Notice the teeming life in even the smallest patches of green.

It’s important to note that it’s never too late to begin exercising. Individuals who are the least fit experience the largest health gains when becoming physically active.

By starting to exercise now, you’ll be sure to reap the mental and physical rewards.

2) Eat Better

Proper nutrition is essential for good health. Eating right is also an important part of reducing stress. What we eat influences how we feel and how we behave. Sugary snacks cause energy levels to spike. If the goal is to maintain an even-keeled temperament and therefore be better prepared to handle stress, parents must maintain steady sources of energy. This means avoiding foods that produce quick peaks and crashes. Candy causes this. Soda is also a culprit.

Why do sweets cause energy fluctuations? The body absorbs simple sugar – the kind found in chocolate and soft drinks – very quickly. It delivers a jolt of energy, followed by an equally fast bottoming out. A better option is choosing foods rich in complex carbohydrates. These deliver a consistent supply of energy to the brain. Examples of complex carbohydrates include fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The added upside of eating these kind of foods, including those high in fiber, is that they keep individuals full longer, allowing them to stay level-headed and maintain a good mood.

Parents can be exceptional role models when it comes to diet and nutrition. Keep healthy snacks and dessert at home. Avoid buying cookies and chips at the grocery store. If you do purchase them, be mindful of how much you eat in one sitting. If you enjoy a little at time, your tweens and teens will learn good habits just by observing yours. And if your child doesn’t love whole apples, for example, don’t despair. Federal dietary guidelines are flexible. For example, the recommended daily 2-cup serving of whole fruit includes fresh, canned, frozen, or dried. Learn more about these guidelines here.

Here’s what you need to remember: If you eat well, your children are more likely to eat well. And as a result, stress levels at home will plummet as family members become healthier and likely calmer.

3) Rest More

Sleep is having a well-deserved moment in the spotlight. Good health depends on getting enough sleep and this vital, life-prolonging fact is getting more media attention than ever before.

Not getting enough rest has significant health consequences. Individuals are more likely to gain weight, develop hypertension, and suffer a stroke. Lack of sleep can be particularly hard on teens. It can make them irritable, more prone to mistakes, and their academic performance can suffer.

The National Sleep Foundation has taken a close look at how much sleep individuals need across their lifespan. Newborns require the most (14-17 hour per day) while people 65 and older need the least (7-8 hours). Teenagers should get 8 to 10 hours per night, and parents do best with 7-9 hours of sleep.

If it’s often hard for you (or your teen) to get enough rest, try these suggestions:

- Keep cellphones out of reach when it’s time for bed. You may even choose to place phones in another room.
- Change cell phones and other screens to nighttime brightness settings a few hours before going to sleep.
- Don’t drink caffeinated beverages within 6-8 hours of bedtime. Choose water, herbal tea, or warm milk instead.
- Take a relaxing bath or shower an hour or so before lights out.
- Release your emotions and all of the to-do lists swirling around your mind before lying down. By the time your head hits the pillow, you want to be able to say, “I’m done.”

One more opportunity for getting more sleep is progressive relaxation, a technique anyone can do in bed to help wind down. Try closing your eyes and becoming more conscious of your body. Starting from the top of your head and working your way down to your toes, become aware of every muscle. Where your awareness goes, notice the tension . . . and then let it go. Stress decreases. Relaxation follows. Add in deep relaxed breathing to intensify the experience. The added upside of this strategy is that it’s super easy to teach. After getting the hang of it, pass the idea along to your teen whenever he or she may need it.

By incorporating these techniques into your parenting routine, you’ll feel better and your health will improve. Your children will also learn, simply by watching you, how to take better care of themselves. And that’s a win-win for your entire house.

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You will be notified if Spaulding is cancelled due to low registration. Please note times/dates of the training (Central Time). Since this is a virtual training, you must have the ability for audio/visual and to have your camera on during the entire training. A computer is best to be able to see the PowerPoint presentation. Questions, please call 402-476-2273 or Toll-Free 877-257-0176



IS IT ADHD OR TRAUMA?

Why the symptoms are often confused, and how to avoid a misdiagnosis

by *Caroline Miller*

When kids are struggling with behavior and attention issues, the first explanation that comes to mind is often ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder).

But exposure to trauma can also cause symptoms that look like ADHD. And trauma can be overlooked and left untreated when kids are misdiagnosed with ADHD.

Children with ADHD can be fidgety (always getting out of their seats), distracted (not paying attention to the teacher), and disruptive in class. Kids who have had a traumatic experience – or repeated exposure to violence or abuse – do some of the same things, explains Jamie Howard, PhD, a clinical psychologist who is a trauma expert at the Child Mind Institute.

Some children who've been exposed to violence or another disturbing experience develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There are also many kids who experience repeated traumatic events in their home or community who develop these symptoms, even though they don't meet all the criteria for PTSD. This is sometimes called "complex trauma," and these kids, too, can be misdiagnosed with ADHD.

And to add to the confusion, kids can also have both ADHD and trauma.

Signs of trauma that can be confused with ADHD

Symptoms of PTSD or complex trauma that might look like ADHD include:

Hyperarousal. Children who've been through a trauma, or exposed to repeated trauma, are unusually sensitive to signs of danger or threat. "If you're on high alert for danger — if you have all sorts of stress hormones surging in your body — it's going to make it hard to sit still and calmly pay attention," explains Dr. Howard. "That can look like the hyperactivity and impulsivity of ADHD."

Reliving traumatic events. Kids exposed to trauma may mentally re-experience traumatic events, and that can make kids look spacey and distracted, like kids with the inattentive type of ADHD. "If you're having intrusive thoughts about a traumatic event you've been through, you're not attending to the present moment," notes Dr. Howard. "You're distracted because you've been through something so big that your mind can't digest it."

A negative view of others. Kids who've experienced trauma have a tendency to perceive people as hostile, to assume they have negative intentions towards them. That can cause kids to act out in ways that can look impulsive (a symptom of ADHD) or oppositional (something kids with ADHD often develop). But in kids with trauma, it's a response to a perceived threat. "Their fight-or-flight system has been activated and is firing even when there is no danger present," notes Caroline Mendel, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute.

Difficulty with executive functions. Like kids with ADHD, children who've experienced trauma tend to have trouble with executive functions like staying focused, planning how to complete a task, managing emotions or thinking things through before acting.

How can you tell whether a child has ADHD or trauma?

The first step in distinguishing what's causing a child's behavior is to consider their history — to find out if they've been exposed to trauma, and the timeline of their symptoms— whether they appeared earlier or after than the trauma. It's also useful to find out whether there is a family history of ADHD, Dr. Mendel notes, because kids whose close relatives have ADHD are more likely to have it themselves.

A clinician looking at all the symptoms a child is exhibiting would be able to identify behaviors of ADHD that distinguish it from trauma, and vice versa. For instance, notes Dr. Howard, kids who are hyperactive and impulsive have behaviors that don't map with trauma: "Interrupting, excessive talkativeness, running down the hallway." Having a variety of hyperactive and impulsive symptoms points to ADHD.

In the same way, kids with PTSD have symptoms that are not consistent with ADHD. For instance, they experience intrusive, disturbing thoughts— not a symptom of ADHD.

Another symptom of PTSD is avoidance of things that remind you of the traumatic experience. As Dr. Howard puts it, "Are they avoiding going home? Getting in a car? Linger in the hallways at school? Especially if you know what trauma they've been exposed to, consider if there's a strategic component to some of their behaviors, because with PTSD it's all designed to keep you safe." Again, this kind of avoidance does not stem from ADHD.

Kids can also have both ADHD and PTSD

Complicating the task of diagnosis, it's also possible for kids to have both ADHD and PTSD.

In fact, there is evidence that children with ADHD who have a disturbing experience are four times as likely to develop PTSD than kids without the disorder. And they're likely to experience more severe trauma symptoms than kids without ADHD.

Imaging studies show that ADHD and PTSD are associated with similar irregularities in brain functioning, which could explain the heightened risk. And that heightened risk means that children with ADHD need extra attention and support in case of a traumatic experience, and should be screened for PTSD, notes Dr. Mendel. Kids diagnosed with PTSD should be screened for ADHD, too.

Why is it important to rule out trauma?

If trauma goes undiagnosed and a child is treated with stimulant medication for ADHD, in some cases the medication can increase trauma-related anxiety, making children more hypervigilant and on edge. If a child is known to have both ADHD and PTSD and stimulant medication makes them more anxious, a clinician would likely decide to switch to a non-stimulant medication.

Most important, when signs of trauma are misdiagnosed as ADHD, children are unlikely to get the specific support they need to deal with the trauma in a healthy way. Unless they get treatment that addresses the trauma with something like trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), their symptoms aren't likely to improve. "ADHD treatment is not going to help them process the trauma," explains Dr. Mendel. "It won't help with their relationships with others, how they see the world, how they view themselves or their future. They're still going to have difficulties managing the thoughts and feelings that come along with having experienced the trauma."

In addition, kids who have behavior problems stemming from unrecognized PTSD tend to be stigmatized, especially if they are diagnosed with a behavior disorder like oppositional-defiant disorder or conduct disorder. "If a school is seeing a child through a behavior lens, they're going to be more likely to remove them from the class, to suspend them, even to call 911," observes Dr. Mendel. "And again, that is not the supportive environment that a child who has experienced trauma needs to heal."

Why is trauma often overlooked?

If a child is having trouble in school, even a well-intentioned clinician may run down a quick list of the symptoms and conclude that the issues are due to undiagnosed ADHD. And, without a more thorough evaluation, that diagnosis can seem like the simplest explanation. "ADHD screening tools are great for identifying children who need support," notes Dr

Mendel. "But if we rely on ADHD checklists alone, without looking at the big picture, it may lead to misdiagnosis."

Parents might not see a link between the child's behavior and possible trauma — or they may not feel comfortable talking about disturbing experiences the child might have had. As a result, they may not volunteer information about it unless they're directly asked. And a clinician might well be reluctant to ask about trauma — which includes things like domestic violence, abuse and neglect — out of worry that it might damage their relationship with the family.

Who is most at risk?

It's especially critical to be alert to the possibility of misdiagnosis in communities where there is a high level of violence. "In populations where kids are exposed to a lot of community violence, there are higher rates of ADHD diagnosis," Dr. Howard notes. It's possible that some of those diagnoses are missing signs of trauma.

Kids are also more at risk where there is poverty, whether it's in urban or rural communities, explains Dr. Howard. "Where there's poverty, there's more trauma, and usually fewer educational resources and taxed teachers." And kids often hide traumatic events, lack the words to explain them, or don't see or understand them for what they are.

Studies show that students of color are more likely to be treated as behavior problems than white students, which can lead to misdiagnosis. "We know that BIPOC students are more likely to be referred and suspended for disciplinary reasons than their white peers," notes Dr. Mendel. "But there's also a higher likelihood of them experiencing traumatic events, whether it's racial trauma or another stressor, like poverty or community violence."

That said, trauma can happen anywhere, to any child, and is often invisible to outsiders. "You don't know if there's domestic violence going on at home," says Dr. Howard. "You don't know if a child's been in a terrible car accident." As a clinician, she says, "You should always consider what's happened to this child that might be causing them to behave this way."

That's why, Dr. Mendel adds, a series of questions about traumatic events should be part of a standard evaluation for any mental health challenge. If it's standard procedure, a family might be less likely to feel singled out by questions about possible trauma, she notes. "Asking those questions should be part of a diagnostic evaluation for any disorder. Look at the symptoms of depression, there's some overlap with trauma. Look at symptoms of anxiety, there's overlap with trauma. You always want to make sure that you have the full picture."

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