

CareCertify LLC

Foster Care Training Series

FC-02

Trauma-Informed Care for Children & Youth

Participant Guide

Foster Care Training Series · Audience: Foster Parents · Agency Staff · Treatment Foster Care Providers · CE Hours: 1.0

Behind the Behavior Is Often Pain

Nearly every child in foster care has experienced trauma — abuse, neglect, loss, and the trauma of being removed from everything familiar. That trauma shapes how children behave, feel, trust, and develop. Trauma-informed care shifts the question from 'what's wrong with this child?' to 'what happened to this child?' — and changes how you respond.

This guide covers how trauma affects children, what removal and loss do, and how to provide care that heals: safety, connection, and predictability. Understanding trauma is what turns a foster home into a healing home.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- Explain what trauma is and how it affects children
- Describe the impact of removal, loss, and grief
- Recognize how trauma shows up in behavior
- Apply the principles of trauma-informed care
- Recognize triggers and support healing

Section 1: What Trauma Is

Trauma results from experiences of harm, threat, or loss that overwhelm a child's ability to cope — abuse, neglect, violence, loss of a caregiver, and the removal from home itself. In foster care, many children have experienced repeated, early trauma (complex trauma), often within their most important relationships. What makes an experience traumatic is the child's experience of it, not just the event.

Section 2: How Trauma Affects the Brain and Behavior

Trauma can leave a child's brain on high alert for danger, so they react to perceived threat with automatic survival responses — fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. These aren't chosen behaviors. Trauma also affects emotional regulation, trust, learning, memory, and development, sometimes making children seem younger than their age in some areas. When you see challenging behavior, consider that it may be a survival response shaped by trauma.

Section 3: The Trauma of Removal, Loss, and Grief

Coming into foster care is itself traumatic. Removal from home — even a harmful one — is a profound loss, and children grieve their family, home, school, friends, pets, and sense of identity all at once. Many feel it's somehow their fault, and feel divided loyalty between their birth family and foster family. This grief is normal. Acknowledge and support it rather than dismissing it, and never disparage a child's birth family.

Section 4: How Trauma Shows Up in Behavior

Trauma shows up in many behaviors with a common root. Aggression, defiance, or controlling behavior often reflect a need for safety and control after experiencing powerlessness. Withdrawal or shutting down can be overwhelm or a freeze response. Lying, hoarding food, or stealing are often survival behaviors. Rejecting closeness can be a fear that relationships aren't safe. Reading behavior as communication helps you respond to the need, not just the behavior.

Section 5: Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care for children rests on a few principles: build safety — not just physical safety but 'felt safety,' the sense of being truly safe; lead with connection and relationship, which is what heals; keep life predictable to calm a vigilant brain; and offer choice and control to children who've felt powerless. You don't need a child's full history to do this — you assume trauma may be present and build a healing environment.

Connection before correction

With a traumatized child, relationship comes first. A child has to feel safe and connected before they can learn, regulate, or change behavior. Lead with connection, not consequences.

Section 6: Attachment, Connection, and Felt Safety

Trauma — especially trauma within relationships — often harms a child's ability to trust and attach. Healing happens through consistent, warm, reliable care that, over time, rebuilds trust. The goal is 'felt safety': not just being safe, but the child's nervous system actually feeling safe. This is built through small, repeated dependable moments — showing up, following through, staying calm — that slowly teach a child that this relationship is different.

Section 7: Triggers and Avoiding Re-traumatization

Triggers — a tone of voice, a smell, a situation — can reactivate a child's trauma response suddenly and powerfully. A reaction that seems out of proportion is often a trigger. Avoid practices that recreate trauma: yelling, harsh or shaming punishment, threats, or removing a child's sense of control. Corporal punishment is never allowed in foster care. When a child is triggered, prioritize helping them feel safe and regulate — calm voice, presence, and reassurance.

Section 8: Supporting Healing and Caregiver Self-Care

Healing from trauma is gradual — celebrate small steps and expect setbacks as part of the process. Work with the child's treatment team and any therapies. And care for yourself: parenting traumatized children is demanding and can cause secondary traumatic stress and burnout. Use support, respite, and your agency's resources. A regulated, supported caregiver helps a dysregulated child find calm — your wellbeing is part of the child's healing.

You can't pour from an empty cup

Secondary trauma is real for foster parents. Use support and respite — caring for yourself is part of caring for the child.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Trauma	An experience of harm, threat, or loss that overwhelms a child's coping.
Complex trauma	Repeated, early trauma, often within relationships.
Felt safety	A child's nervous system actually feeling safe, not just being safe.
Trigger	A cue that reactivates a trauma response.
Trauma-informed care	Care that assumes trauma may be present and builds safety and connection.
Secondary traumatic stress	Stress in caregivers from caring for traumatized children.

Check Your Understanding

1. Why has nearly every child in foster care experienced trauma?
2. How can trauma show up in a child's behavior?
3. Why is removal itself traumatic?
4. What does 'connection before correction' mean?
5. What is felt safety, and how is it built?

What's Next

Looking ahead

Next, FC-03: Children's & Youth Rights in Foster Care covers the rights every child in care holds.