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The Connections newsletter is for Foster Parent College (FPC) parents and agency staff. It contains articles, parenting tips, and FPC news and updates.

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## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD

By Rick Delaney, Ph.D.



Many foster children suffer from anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, specific phobias, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress

disorder. Of all the anxiety disorders seen in foster children, anecdotally post traumatic stress disorder appears most frequently. But what, you might ask, is PTSD? Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that has a serious impact on how the child's brain functions. PTSD appears after the experience of a significant trauma which inflicts or threatens to inflict harm on the child or teenager. Terror or fear and a sense of helplessness are involved.

Traumatic events can include physical or sexual abuse, or such incidents as being kidnapped or witnessing the death of a parent. One research study reported that almost two thirds of foster children who had been sexually abused displayed PTSD symptoms. These symptoms can include: intrusive memories, withdrawal and/or numbing, and on-going signs of elevated arousal. Here's how Martha and Bob Mayer described their foster son's problems:

*Timothy, an 11-year-old foster child, had never spoken of his past history with anyone. But, he seemed jumpy, distractible, preoccupied and shut-down emotionally at times, and withdrawn from others. He rarely showed any emotion, except for fright. He often could not drop off to sleep because he was afraid of the dark. We would regularly find him awake at night, and he would tell us he'd had a nightmare again. When he played with some of his toy people, he always tied them up with string or bound them with tape. Timothy seemed alarmed by any males wearing beards.*

*And, if you entered a room where he was playing, Timothy would jump out of his skin with fear.*

*Odd things would set him off. He was removing his sweatshirt by pulling it over his head, and it got stuck. He freaked like he was trapped and started screaming. This really shocked me. He started screaming angrily at me. It's like he has some sort of flashbacks or something.*

The foster parents did not know it until much later, but Timothy had been physically and sexually abused in very perverted and twisted ways involving being restrained, tied up, and left in the dark. This foster child seemed to re-experience the event over and over again. His play, his recurring nightmares, his obvious distress when confined seemed symptomatic of the abuse and resulting PTSD. Even his withdrawal from others, preoccupation (and concentration problems) and startle response pointed to PTSD as well.

### Why Do Kids Act This Way?

All children and adolescents deal with stress and mildly traumatic events which can impact them both emotionally and physically. Normally, their response to these events is short-lived and they bounce back quickly without long-lasting effects. However, when the stress or trauma is serious, severe or catastrophic, PTSD may result. Here are some events or catastrophes which can cause PTSD:

- Sexual and physical abuse
- Automobile accidents
- Receiving a diagnosis of a life threatening illness
- Suffering through a severely painful surgery or procedure
- Exposure to domestic violence in the home

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- ▶ Surviving an “act of God”, such as, flood, fire, earthquake or hurricane
- ▶ Living in a war zone
- ▶ Surviving a terrorist attack
- ▶ Rape

Exposure to these kinds of trauma can increase levels of three brain hormones – cortisol, serotonin, and nor-adrenaline – which may impair brain development and actually change how the brain works. Children who live in a constant state of fear in, say, dangerous, abusive families, also live in a state of chronic stress. This can result in a variety of developmental delays as well as problems with controlling emotions such as anger and fear. In general the brain chemistry can be changed by trauma so that the child might be ultra tuned-in to signs of danger and aggression.

**Can Anything Be Done About It? Yes!**

With the responsiveness and availability of parents and professionals, foster children and teenagers with PTSD can be helped to overcome or deal with the effects of the traumatic incident(s) and move on with their lives happily and productively. But, how can you as a foster parent specifically help in the healing process? Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ **Early Intervention:** the sooner the child receives professional help the better the outcome may be. Talk with your caseworker about securing care for your traumatized foster child. If there is doubt about what has happened inquire about having the child evaluated by a mental health professional.
- ▶ **A Sense of Safety:** Exposure to trauma leaves the foster child or adolescent feeling powerless, helpless and victimized. Not surprisingly they feel vulnerable and unprotected. It is essential for the

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- foster parent to help the child feel safe. Some children have never felt safe in their life.
- ▶ **Providing A Secure Haven:** If and when the child reveals what has happened to him/her and expresses feelings about it, foster parents should try to remain calm and supportive to the child or teenager.
- ▶ **A Feeling of Mastery:** Older foster children with PTSD may be helped by opportunities to talk about what they experienced or survived. Some children report the trauma to foster parents before telling anyone else in their lives. Allowing the child to recount graphically what happened, though, may be somewhat traumatic for you as a foster parent. The foster parent may need to talk with the caseworker and the child’s therapist about how much to encourage the child to divulge and process.
- ▶ **Reassuring the Child:** Foster parents should reassure the child that their on-going struggles following the trauma are not a sign of weakness. It’s important that children and teenagers who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse are reas-

sured that the victimization was not their fault.

- ▶ **Psychotherapy for the Child:** Sometimes foster children have problems with depression, anxiety, or other emotional problems related to the trauma. Various forms of psychotherapy which permit and encourage the child to express feelings and memories about the event may be helpful. Trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy has been shown to help children and adolescents with PTSD.
- ▶ **Medication:** Medication may also be useful to deal with agitation, anxiety, or depression.

~ Rick Delaney, Ph.D., is an author, presenter, trainer and clinician.

**Note:** To learn more about anxiety disorders, such as PTSD, and other issues important to foster, kinship and adoptive parents, please visit us at **FOSTERPARENTCOLLEGE.COM**.

**Foster Parent College Releases 20th Online Training Course; Dr. Jim Kagan Tackles 'Childhood Anxiety Disorders'**



Foster Parent College has launched its 20th feature training course via the World Wide Web. The latest course, "Childhood Anxiety Disorders," features noted pediatric psychiatrist Dr. James Kagan with a panel of foster parents as they discuss and consider treatments for their foster children of all ages.

Disorders discussed include separation anxiety, social anxiety, panic attacks, phobias and other childhood worries. Dr. Kagan considers each child's issues and discusses professional therapeutic counseling, psychotherapy and medication options that are available for children and adolescents.

At the end of this course, parents should be able to:

1. Identify symptoms and causes of anxiety disorders.
2. List types of anxiety disorders.
3. Identify emotional symptoms that may be signs of an anxiety disorder.
4. Describe steps that can be taken to help children with anxiety disorders.
5. Identify treatment options for children with anxiety disorders.

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