

Birth Parents with Trauma Histories in the Child Welfare System

A Guide for Parents

You may be one of the many parents involved with the Child Welfare System who has experienced or witnessed dangerous, even life-threatening, events known as trauma. If so, this resource is for you. It includes facts about trauma that you may find helpful and one parent's story.

KAREN'S STORY

Karen feels completely overwhelmed. She has been trying so hard to hold everything together, but no matter how much effort she puts in, she can't seem to do anything right. She has been through a lot. She remembers watching her father beat up her mother and being put in foster care. She didn't think anything could be worse than her own childhood, but seeing her own kids go through the same stuff is worse. She never intended to end up like her mom—it just seemed to happen. Her kids' father died three years ago, and Karen wound up with a partner who hit her and them. She felt helpless, unable to protect her kids from him, but sometimes she got so upset that she would hurt them too. Six months ago, Protective Services put her kids in foster care, and now she feels even more helpless. Every time she sees Jonathan, age 3, and Crystal, age 6, they are crying and yelling, and she just can't get them to behave. Karen gets upset when they call their foster mom "Grandma." On top of it all, the caseworker Linda accuses her of not working hard enough to do the things she said she'd do. Sometimes the system makes her feel like that six-year-old foster child all over again — alone and powerless.

Although Karen wants her children back, she worries that everyone may be right: she is a bad mother. Maybe that's why her kids aren't happy to see her and why they seem to like the foster parents more. While she knows some things she could do to improve, she is too exhausted to make any changes. Her house is getting really messy, but with her kids and her boyfriend gone, it doesn't seem to matter anymore.

Karen has gone to therapy a few times, but she's never liked it. It's easier to just forget about things. Talking about them over and over only makes it harder to sleep at night. Also, she's afraid about what the therapist is saying about her to the caseworker. The couple of times she has made it to her kids' therapy appointments, she thought the therapist acted as if he knew Jonathan and Crystal better than she does. If her kids could just come home, she knows she could work everything out.

What is trauma?

A trauma is an intense event that threatens a person's life or safety in a way that is too much for the mind to handle and leaves the person powerless. Trauma can bring about physical reactions such as rapid heart rate, tense muscles, or shallow breathing. Common traumatic events could be going through or seeing:

- Family violence
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Violence in the community

For many parents, having a child removed from home and dealing with the child welfare system are traumatic events.

People who have experienced trauma might:

- Have nightmares, memories, or flashbacks that feel as if they're going through the traumatic event all over again
- Avoid things or people that remind them of the trauma
- Feel "on guard" or "jumpy," making it hard to sleep or concentrate

Karen experienced trauma both as a child and as an adult. She saw and heard her father beating her mother. She was removed from her parents' home and put into foster care. As an adult, her partner hit her. Now, she tries not to talk about any of it, because thinking about the past makes it hard for her to sleep.

How can trauma affect you and your parenting?

A history of trauma may make it difficult for you to:

- Recognize what is safe and what is unsafe, and keep you and your children from harm
- Stay in control of your emotions, especially in stressful situations like interviews with Child Protective Services, court hearings, or visits with your children
- Deal with stress in healthy ways
- Trust other people

When parents have lived through trauma, they may also struggle with reminders of those events. Reminders can happen without warning: a sound, smell, or even a feeling makes survivors of trauma feel the experience all over again. Reactions to reminders may include:

- Physical feelings: rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, or tense muscles
- Emotional over-reactions: anger, fear, irritability in situations or toward people— without even realizing it
- Avoiding: staying away from others or putting off daily tasks—in order to avoid more reminders
- Using alcohol or drugs to try to feel better

Trauma can affect your relationship with your child:

- Your children may not trust that you can keep them safe.
- You and your children may remind each other of the traumatic event just by being together, even if you weren't together when it happened.
- You and your children may expect "bad things" to happen again.
- You may not recognize when your children's behaviors are caused by reactions to trauma reminders and think they are misbehaving on purpose to make you mad.

Karen has trouble trusting Linda, her case worker. Linda says she's there to help, but Karen can remember plenty of people who said they'd "be there," but have ended up hurting her. Also, Linda keeps telling her to talk to the therapist about her past, but Karen would much rather avoid thinking about it.

What can you do?

If you are a parent who has had trauma, consider trying the following:

- Remember that your symptoms are normal reactions to traumatic events.
- Talk about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions with people you trust.
- Become aware of reminders of traumatic events.
- Learn healthy ways to feel safe and relaxed:
 - Practice slow breathing
 - Say positive things to yourself ("This is scary, but I'm safe now")
 - Listen to a relaxation CD or to music that calms you
 - Leave on a night light
- Find someone who has been in your shoes—who understands what it's like to be in the system and has come through it well. Your community may offer Peer Mentors or Parent Advocates for parents in the child welfare system.
- Be patient with yourself. Healing is a process that takes time.
- Be patient with your children; they may misbehave because of the trauma.
- Seek professional help. Therapy is a good way to start making sense of what happened, how it has affected you, and how you can heal.

How can therapy help?

A therapist who understands trauma will work with you to do the following:

- Feel safe
- Decide on goals for therapy
- Learn about trauma and its effects on thoughts, feelings, and actions
- Use healthy ways to relax and cope with stress
- Make sense of the past and find ways to build a more hopeful future

SIX MONTHS LATER...

What Karen has to say: I didn't realize that the trauma I went through as a child was still affecting me—making me feel helpless. Having my kids removed was the worst thing that ever happened. My life started to change when I began to believe that I could make things better for me and my kids. It's been a long time, but I have started to heal. My therapist helps me learn ways to manage my trauma symptoms, like taking slow breaths when I start to feel upset. My Parent Advocate helps me understand how my trauma reactions affect my parenting. Now, I take better care of myself AND my kids. We go to the local community center for classes and family activities, and I go to a Domestic Violence Support Group. My children are doing better too, although they still talk about bad times and have nightmares once in a while. Crystal was in trouble at school for being too active and not listening to directions, so now my kids come to therapy with me. I guess we'll go for as long as we need too. Life can be difficult at times — because I am a single mom — but it sure is better than before. I don't ever want to go back, and I know now that I don't have to.

This fact sheet is one in a series of factsheets discussing parent trauma in the child welfare system. To view others, go to <https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/creating-trauma-informed-systems/child-welfare>

Resources:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org

National Center for PTSD: www.ptsd.va.gov

Parents Anonymous: www.parentsanonymous.org

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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