



HOW DO I KNOW IF A BEHAVIOR IS RELATED TO TRAUMA?

By Donald Bartosik, LMFT,
and Tom Holahan, M.Ed.

In the United States, 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women report exposure to at least one lifetime traumatic event, and 90 percent of clients in public behavioral health care settings have experienced trauma. Providing care in a trauma-informed manner promotes positive health outcomes.

We use the words “trauma,” “traumatic” and “trauma-informed” every day, but what do they really mean? According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website, individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being. Most would agree that just being removed from your family of origin is likely to be traumatic.

Foster and adoptive parents, and whoever becomes the permanent caregivers for youth in foster care,

have to wear many hats to be successful. They must be experts at building relationships. They need to provide for the physical and emotional needs of the youth in their care. They have to be incredibly effective at understanding youth behavior and equally effective at considering how to shape youth behavior. And, doing all these things within the context of a safe, predictable environment requires a trauma-informed approach. In other words, these caregivers recognize signs and symptoms of trauma and look at problematic youth behavior through a different lens.

In our work with foster care agencies, we frequently challenge staff and caretakers to consider

what is underneath the surface of the youth's behavior. Why does this matter? Because youth in foster care are communicating as much or more so with behavior than with words, and we must pay close attention to understand what needs they are trying to meet. Youth with trauma histories also commonly (mis)behave in ways that keep caretakers at an emotionally safe distance, as a way to protect themselves. If caretakers do not recognize this and instead immediately discipline the youth, there is greater potential to reinforce youths' negative self-talk and further damage youths' sense of self.

We also encourage staff and parents to be mindful of how and when to most effectively intervene and to determine what exactly they hope to teach by using a particular behavior management strategy. Our hope is that caregivers consider discipline to be a way to impart knowledge and skills for the youth to learn how to more effectively interact with the world. Sometimes, caretakers might determine that implementing a consequence might do more damage than good. This is a critical part of being trauma-informed — to actively seek ways to avoid triggering youth. As we consider the complexities of trauma and the impact on behavior, we must also be intentional about our use of strategies to address youths' problematic behavior.

As we look at consequences through a trauma-informed lens, it is important to define what we mean by a consequence. For our purposes, a consequence is a result that happens in the environment following a behavior that decreases the likelihood that said behavior will occur in the future. Consequences, when implemented purposefully by caretakers, serve to modify/



Because youth in foster care are communicating as much or more so with behavior than with words, and we must pay close attention to understand what needs they are trying to meet. Youth with trauma histories also commonly (mis)behave in ways that keep caretakers at an emotionally safe distance, as a way to protect themselves.

shape problematic behavior so youth might learn more prosocial ways to get their needs met.

Particular qualities of trauma-informed consequences to consistently keep in mind are that they:

- Are proactively planned and allow for youth input.
- Offer youth voice and choice when possible.
- Relate to problematic behavior to maximize learning.
- Assist youth in learning how their behavior impacts themselves and others.
- Are consistent/congruent with the severity of problematic behavior.
- Consider the function(s) of the problematic behavior in an effort to help youth learn how to get their needs met in a prosocial way.
- Recognize, to the greatest extent possible, a youth's trauma history in

- order to avoid triggering the youth.
- Ensure ongoing psychological, physical and emotional safety of youth.
 - Are implemented with predictability and consistent follow-through.
 - Maintain the therapeutic relationship between caregiver and youth.
 - Are sensitive to a youth's previous life experiences and cultural background.

The most appropriate context within which youth can experience consequences that are trauma-informed is

Natural consequences are often underutilized but should be considered as a first option for caretakers. However, there are times, due to safety and/or severity, when natural consequences should not be allowed to happen. The natural consequence of playing in the street is that a child may get hit by a car. In this case, a caretaker must intervene because the natural consequence is too dangerous as safety is clearly compromised. The natural consequence of not completing a major school project is to fail the class, and this

caretakers could choose to sit down with the youth and emphasize that their home is a safe, loving environment, and that the youth will have access to healthy snacks whenever hungry.

Instead of allowing a natural consequence to occur or implementing a logical consequence, the caretaker responds in a way that best focuses on how to meet the youth's emotional needs for safety and security related to food access.

You may ask yourself, "How do I know if a behavior is related to trauma?" The truth is, as caretakers or professionals, we don't always know. However, when we are faced with difficult youth behavior, we can be more trauma-informed just by giving ourselves permission to slow down enough to avoid reacting out of anger or frustration. When we consider that the behavior we see in front of us might be connected in some way to hardships our youth experienced, we can be more intentional about responding in a way that teaches him or her prosocial skills and nurtures our relationship with them. We can make more deliberate and informed decisions about the best response: natural consequences, logical consequences, or perhaps no consequences at all. If we are able to "parent" in this more proactive way, we create safer environments for youth to build skills, increase self-esteem and ultimately experience success. •

Don Bartosik, LMFT, and Tom Holahan M.Ed., are certified trainers and consultants in the Together Facing the Challenge program in Duke University's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

It is critical to remember that many problematic behaviors that youth in care display are related to past trauma; and in some cases, the behavior does not require a consequence at all. In fact, giving a consequence in these situations could trigger further problematic behavior from the youth.

either through natural consequences or logical consequences. Natural consequences are simple to define — they are the result of allowing the situation, following a problematic behavior, to continue to its natural outcome with no intervention by the caretaker. For example, if a child leaves a favorite toy out in the rain, it will be ruined. If a teen does not launder his football uniform, it will not be ready for the next game.

A natural consequence requires little from caretakers except to get out of the way and let circumstances take their course. A logical consequence is directly related to the youth's problematic behavior and requires the caregiver to intervene. For example, if a youth chooses to not complete his/her homework, a caretaker could choose to not allow the youth to go to the mall with friends until the homework is completed.

might also keep a high school senior from graduating. In this scenario, the natural consequence is too severe, so caretakers should implement a logical consequence instead.

What can caretakers do when a problematic behavior a youth is exhibiting is not responding to a particular natural or logical consequence, and might be related to the youth's trauma history? It is critical to remember that many problematic behaviors that youth in care display are related to past trauma; and in some cases, the behavior does not require a consequence at all. In fact, giving a consequence in these situations could trigger further problematic behavior from the youth. Rather, the clinical team should work with the caretaker to help the youth find ways to address this trauma and heal from it. For example, in the case of a youth who is hoarding food,