

Understanding Trauma

"People often ask me, 'What behavior should I expect from a child who has experienced trauma?'

My answer usually surprises them.

There isn't one."

Every child responds to trauma differently.

Some children become loud.

Some become quiet.

Some become angry.

Some become people pleasers.

Some seem remarkably well adjusted.

Trauma does not create a specific behavior. It changes the way a child experiences the world.

One child may become hyper-independent because they've learned no one is coming to help.

Another may cling desperately to every adult they meet because they fear being abandoned again.

A third child may seem completely unaffected while quietly carrying wounds no one else can see.

I often think of a duck gliding across a pond. From the shore, the duck appears calm and effortless. But beneath the surface, its feet are paddling furiously just to keep moving forward.

Many children who have experienced trauma are the same way. On the outside they may appear calm, compliant, or unaffected. Inside, however, they are working incredibly hard just to manage the emotions, fears, and memories that no one else can see.

Just because a child doesn't show their struggle doesn't mean they aren't struggling.

This is why understanding trauma is one of the most important things you can do as an adoptive parent.

When you understand trauma, behavior begins to make sense.

You stop asking,

"How do I stop this?"

Instead of seeing behaviors as manipulation, defiance, or dishonesty, you begin to recognize them as survival skills that once served an important purpose.

That single shift changes everything.

It changes your questions.

It changes your response.

Most importantly, it changes your relationship with your child.

What Is Trauma?

When many people hear the word *trauma*, they immediately think of a terrible accident, physical abuse, or witnessing violence.

Those experiences are certainly traumatic.

But trauma isn't defined only by **what happened**, but rather **how the brain and body responded to what happened**.

Two children can experience the exact same event and respond very differently.

One may recover quickly.

Another may carry the effects for years.

Trauma occurs when an experience overwhelms a child's ability to cope.

Children have very few ways to protect themselves.

They can't leave.

They can't drive away.

They can't find another family.

Instead, their developing brains adapt to survive.

Those adaptations are incredibly intelligent.

The problem is that what helps a child survive an unsafe home often makes life difficult in a safe one.

Trauma Is More Than One Big Event

One of the biggest misconceptions I hear is that trauma only comes from extreme situations.

In reality, trauma can result from a single frightening event.

It can also develop slowly over months or years.

Imagine carrying a backpack.

One heavy rock probably won't break you.

But if someone quietly adds another rock every day, eventually the weight becomes overwhelming.

That's often what developmental trauma looks like.

Not one enormous event.

Hundreds of moments where a child's world felt unpredictable, unsafe, frightening, or lonely.

Developmental Trauma

Children develop through relationships.

Every smile.

Every hug.

Every comforting voice.

Every bedtime story.

Every time an adult responds to a cry.

These seemingly ordinary moments are actually shaping a child's brain.

When those experiences are absent or when caregivers are frightening instead of comforting the brain develops differently.

Children who experience developmental trauma aren't simply remembering painful experiences.

Their brains were built while living inside those experiences.

That is why healing often takes much longer than simply finding a loving family.

The goal isn't helping them forget their past.

The goal is helping their brain experience something entirely new.

Safety.

Consistency.

Connection.

Trauma Begins Earlier Than We Once Thought

Many people believe trauma begins after birth.

Research has shown that a baby's development begins long before they take their first breath.

Stress hormones experienced during pregnancy can influence fetal brain development.

Substance exposure, poor nutrition, domestic violence, chronic stress, and lack of prenatal care may all affect how a baby's nervous system develops before birth.

This doesn't mean every child with prenatal exposure will struggle.

Nor does it mean their future has already been written.

The brain remains incredibly adaptable throughout childhood.

This isn't meant to create fear or suggest that a child's future is predetermined.

Instead, it reminds us that some children begin carrying burdens before they are even born.

The encouraging news is that the brain remains remarkably adaptable throughout childhood. Healing is possible.

How Trauma Changes the Brain

Imagine your child's brain as a house.

The downstairs is responsible for survival.

Breathing.

Heart rate.

Safety.

Reflexes.

The upstairs is where thinking, reasoning, empathy, planning, and self-control happen.

When a child repeatedly experiences danger, the downstairs brain becomes incredibly strong.

It learns one job:

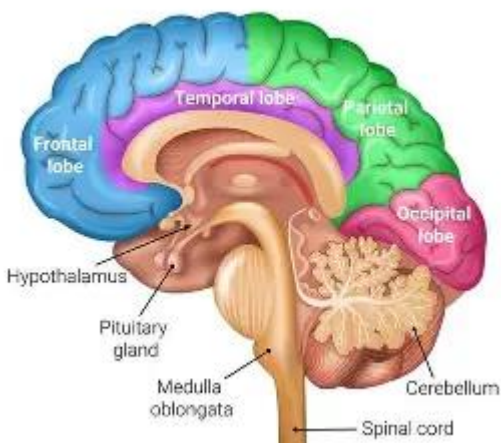
Keep me alive.

The upstairs brain, however, has fewer opportunities to practice skills like problem solving, emotional regulation, and flexible thinking.

So when your child appears to "overreact," they often aren't choosing between good behavior and bad behavior.

They're choosing between survival and connection.

Their brain believes survival comes first.



One of my favorite ways to explain trauma is through something you always have with you your hand.

Over the years, I've taught the Hand Model of the Brain to children as young as three years old, teenagers, parents, and entire families. I love this model because it takes a complicated concept and makes it easy to understand.

More importantly, it gives children words to describe what's happening inside them.

Instead of saying, "I'm bad," they can begin saying, "I flipped my lid."

That small change can completely transform the way a family talks about emotions

Here is a link to a video that goes through the model. [Hand model of the brain](#)

The Hand Model of the Brain was developed by Daniel J. Siegel as one of the simplest ways to explain how the brain works under stress.

This is one of my favorite ways to explain the brain and I find it is easily understood by both kids and families.

It is helpful for kids to understand why they respond the way they do. And helping them to understand what they are feeling and how they can reregulate themselves. The hand model is one of the tools I have used to give youth from the ages of 3 to 18 the words and motions to ask for help when they are dysregulated.

Hold one hand out with your palm facing you.

Now tuck your thumb into the center of your palm and wrap your four fingers over the top of your thumb.

Congratulations! You are now holding a simple model of your brain.

Your **wrist** represents your spinal cord, carrying messages between your brain and the rest of your body.

Your **thumb**, tucked safely inside your fingers, represents the deeper parts of your brain often called the **limbic system**. This area processes emotions, stores emotional memories, and constantly scans the environment for signs of safety or danger. Within this region is a small structure called the **amygdala**, sometimes referred to as the brain's "alarm system."

Your **folded fingers** represent the **prefrontal cortex**, the part of the brain responsible for reasoning, problem-solving, empathy, planning, self-control, and making thoughtful decisions. This is the part of the brain we rely on when we pause before reacting, consider another person's perspective, or solve a difficult problem.

When we feel safe and regulated, these parts of the brain work together beautifully. Our thinking brain helps calm our emotional brain, allowing us to make wise decisions instead of reacting impulsively.

But when the brain senses danger, something remarkable happens.

"Flipping Your Lid"

Keeping your thumb tucked in your palm, suddenly lift your fingers straight up.

This is what Dr. Dan Siegel calls "**flipping your lid**."

When the brain believes it is in danger, the connection between the thinking brain and the emotional brain becomes disrupted.

The reasoning part of the brain essentially goes offline, while the survival part takes over.

Think about a time when you were startled by someone jumping out from behind a corner. Before you even had time to think, your heart raced, your muscles tightened, and maybe you even screamed. Your body reacted first. Your thinking brain caught up later.

Children who have experienced trauma "flip their lid" much more easily than children who have consistently felt safe.

To us, it may seem like they're overreacting because we see only the present moment.

To them, their brain is responding not only to today's situation but also to everything it has learned from the past.

A raised voice.

A certain smell.

A slammed door.

Someone standing too close.

Being told "no."

Any of these can activate the brain's alarm system, even when no real danger exists.

Why this matters for Parents.

When your child's lid is flipped, reasoning isn't very effective. This is why talking to them about consequences, or asking, "Why did you do that?" often don't work in the middle of a meltdown. Their thinking brain isn't fully available.

Before we can teach, correct or problem-solve, we must first help our child feel safe enough for their thinking brain to come back online.

That is why connection comes before correction.

Safety comes before problem- solving.

Regulation comes before reasoning.

Understanding why a behavior happens does not excuse the behavior, rather it equips us to respond in a way that teaches instead of punishes.

What does this look like?

When the brain detects danger, it prepares the body to survive.

That response usually looks like one of four patterns.

Fight

Fight isn't just physical aggression.

It can sound like arguing.

Backtalk.

Control.

Defiance.

Tantrums.

The child isn't necessarily trying to be difficult.

Their brain has decided offense is the safest defense.

I often find that children who rely on the fight response grew up around adults who were explosive themselves.

Somewhere along the way, they learned that the loudest person had the most control.

If they became bigger, louder, angrier, or more intimidating, they were less likely to be hurt.

What looks like aggression is often fear wearing armor.

Flight

Some children survive by escaping.

They may run away.

Hide.

Avoid difficult conversations.

Become perfectionists.

Stay constantly busy.

Even excessive talking can sometimes be a form of flight.

These are often the children who learned that staying invisible kept them safe. They learned not to ask for too much. Not to make waves. Not to attract attention. Because they aren't throwing tantrums or arguing, adults sometimes assume they're doing well.

In reality, they're carrying the same fear as the child who fights. They've simply learned a different survival strategy.

Freeze

Other children become completely still.

They shut down emotionally.

They stare blankly.

Forget instructions.

Seems unmotivated.

Appear disconnected.

Parents sometimes mistake freeze for laziness.

Often, it's a nervous system that has become overwhelmed.

These are often children who look like they don't care. But in reality they care so much that their nervous system has simply shut down to protect themselves.

Fawn

Fawn is less commonly discussed but incredibly important.

These children survive by keeping everyone happy.

They apologize constantly.

Never express opinions.

Become the "perfect child."

Avoid conflict at all costs.

Many adults praise these children.

Yet inside, they're often terrified that disappointing someone means losing love.

When Behavior Finally Makes Sense

One of my favorite moments with adoptive parents is when something suddenly clicks.

A child who steals food isn't necessarily greedy.

They may remember being hungry.

...

A child who lies may not be manipulative.

They may have learned telling the truth wasn't safe.

...

A child who refuses hugs may not be rejecting love.

They may simply not know what safe affection feels like.

Behavior is communication.

Every behavior asks a question.

"Am I safe?"

"Will you leave too?"

"Can I trust you?"

"Will you still love me after this?"

When we respond only to behavior, we often miss the question underneath it.

When we respond to the need beneath the behavior, healing begins.

A child who melts down over a broken cookie may not be upset about the cookie. They may be responding to disappointment that feels much bigger than the moment itself.

Another way I like to describe this to families is to picture a stress tank. Those who were raised in happy healthy homes have low levels of stress as their baseline maybe 0-10% capacity. So it often takes a lot for them to get to the point of a meltdown. But for youth that have experienced significant trauma they often have a baseline stress already at 60-70% so one small issue may push it over the edge. They are not going from 0 to 100 very quickly; they are simply starting at 60%.

Hope for Healing

Everything we've talked about in this chapter might feel overwhelming.

You may wonder,

"Can my child really heal?"

The answer is yes.

Not because trauma disappears.

But because the brain was designed by God with an incredible capacity to grow, adapt, and change.

Healing happens through thousands of small moments.

A parent who stays calm.

A promise that is kept.

A bedtime routine that stays predictable.

A hug that's offered without pressure.

An adult who keeps showing up.

Those moments may seem ordinary.

But to a child whose world has been unpredictable, they are extraordinary.

Trauma may shape a child's story.

It does not have to determine the ending.

Reflection Questions

- Which trauma responses do you most recognize in your child?
- Which behaviors have you been interpreting as defiance instead of survival?
- How might your response change if you first asked, *"What is my child communicating?"*

Remember: Children do well when they can. When they can't, it's our invitation to discover what skills, supports, or safety they still need.

