



Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma: A Workshop for Resource Parents

Tips from Experienced Trainers

In this document, expert trainers from diverse centers in the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offer their best advice on how to use the Resource Parent Curriculum. They base their answers on their experience piloting and teaching the curriculum in varied settings over the past several years.

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How long does the training take?

The training takes 12-16 hours, depending upon the schedule and format used and the time allowed for participant discussion and interaction. Some modules require less than 1.5 hours, and others, more. One experienced trainer says, “The curriculum takes at least 16 hours to present if you allow for a reasonable amount of discussion. When resource parents get a chance to meet with each other, they want to use the occasion for mutual support, and this enhances the learning experience and their willingness to try new methods.”

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What format works best?

The eight modules of the curriculum may be delivered in different ways, with pros and cons for each format.

It is possible, but not recommended, to cover the material in two days of back-to-back training. However, this accelerated format does not maximize learning and may be overwhelming for participants. Parent learners often remark on the value of being able to spend time reading and processing the manual and other educational materials between sessions. Then they can bring their questions and insights to share at subsequent sessions. If you must cover the material in two days, follow up with individual consultation calls to provide participants with a forum for further discussion.

Most trainers prefer to divide the material into multiple sessions delivered over a couple of months. This allows participants to practice actually applying concepts and techniques between sessions. As they meet over an extended period of time, they can share their struggles and successes. Since an important goal of the training is to change parenting styles, allowing more time gives participants the opportunity to hone new skills and report back to the group on their successes.

Two options for delivering the material over a period of time are six weekly sessions of 2.5 hours each or four 4-hour biweekly sessions. A biweekly schedule may be the best choice if participants must travel some distance for the training.

The first three modules constitute the core trauma training. Some trainers have found it very effective to offer these modules in one session, and then offer modules 4-8 over subsequent weeks as “electives.” They caution, however, that this sort of flexible training schedule (where sessions are made optional and/or not offered in sequence) can feel disjointed and reduce group cohesion, an important benefit of the training experience for some parents.

If the training is spread over many weeks, the trainer must build in time to recap and review, which can extend the total training time to as many as 15-20 hours. If sessions are scheduled across weeks, attendance may be a challenge (see section on reducing attrition, below). In some cases, of course, the schedule and format of the training are determined by external considerations. For example, one group had to train in 3-hour segments because of room availability and pre-existing resource parent training schedules. The curriculum was divided into three 3-hour chunks, which participants could attend in any sequence.

Trainers recommend considering the needs of your particular families when scheduling. Some families prefer trainings during school hours because of the problem of securing childcare. Although in some communities it might make sense to avoid scheduling summer sessions, others have had long wait lists for summer classes. Some families, for example, find it much easier to attend evening classes in the summer because their children have fewer structured after-school activities.

What is the optimum size of the group?

Effective groups typically range from 8-30 people, with 10-20 considered optimal because of the extent to which the training relies on discussion and small group activities. If presenting to a larger group, facilitators should plan on more time for discussion (extending the overall training time), or they may need to modify the “report out” portion of group activities to limit the time spent sharing.

The greatest challenge for a group of any size is to keep the training interactive. This is usually easier to accomplish in a smaller group. Relationship-building among the participants, and between trainers and participants, can be negatively affected when the group includes more than 20 participants. Using multiple resource parent co-facilitators is one way to create a climate that feels safe for sharing stories. This approach usually increases interactions, making it possible to conduct successful groups of as many as 30-35 participants. The opportunity to talk through situations with other parents and learn from one another is an important element of the training; the size of the group only matters insofar as it allows for or inhibits the kinds of interaction that enhance parents’ ability to integrate the material.

Who should participate?

Most trainers agree that anyone interested and willing to learn should be allowed to participate. As one trainer explained, “When we invite people to participate, our primary concern is their openness to learning a trauma perspective and not the number of years they’ve fostered or the type of caregiving they provide.”

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Groups should be diverse and can include anyone who cares for a traumatized child. Consider mixing kinship caregivers, adoptive parents, experienced and newer resource parents, families from different agencies, resource parents with children of different ages, resource parents who seem to “get it” when it comes to trauma and those who seem to need the trauma information the most. All these types of learners can benefit from the material, but students benefit equally from one another’s perspectives and experience. If the group is too homogenous, the participants miss out on the learning that occurs parent to parent. As one trainer explains, “It is my experience that diverse groups offer the greatest opportunity for learning, but they can be very difficult for an inexperienced presenter.” Biological parents have also participated in some groups. Feedback from participants has been positive, although attention must be paid to knowing one’s audience and presenting information in a culturally sensitive, respectful manner.

There is value, however, in having some commonalities among participants. Since a benefit of this training comes from participants sharing suggestions and hearing about each other’s experiences, trainers caution against inviting just one outlier to a homogenous group. For example, it may not be effective to mix one family who primarily fosters toddlers with 20 families who all foster teenagers. Parents who are “outliers” might feel limited in their ability to discuss issues specific to their child’s age or developmental stage. Because many of the exercises in the curriculum require resource parents to apply the concepts to actual children, the training should be offered to families who already have children placed in their homes.

One trainer recommends that for your first training cycle, you invite your “A team” of foster parents—innovators and early adopters of change who are willing to try out new ideas and who are actively parenting children with trauma histories. This increases your chances of success and enables you to collect outcome data immediately, under optimal circumstances, with families actually applying the new trauma lens regularly. Decisions about allocating resources to future trainings can be based on real outcomes. A secondary benefit is that this trained group of families, who perhaps already have a natural inclination for this type of parenting, could serve as mentors to the next round of trainees.

Should child welfare staff attend the same training as resource parents?

If child welfare staff attend, they should do so in very limited numbers and for the purpose of being trained as future trainers. With too many staff in the room, parents become more inhibited. One trainer suggests, for example, keeping the ratio of staff to foster parents relatively small, such as 3-5 staff in a training of 30 foster parents. This allows the benefits of cross-training but maintains the focus on parenting. It also keeps the environment “safe enough” for foster parents to share stories and mistakes, which is vital to the process. If you do choose to include agency professionals, group home staff, or county workers in the training, you must be attentive to, and address, the “us versus them” mentality that can impede the ability of parents and professionals to work together for the benefit of the children.

Whether they should receive the training with parents or in groups of their own, child welfare staff should definitely receive similar training, using either the same curriculum or the NCTSN Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit. This way, everyone in the system will begin to speak the same language. Resource parents feel less alone and more supported in implementing changes when they hear that case managers, licensors, supervisors, etc., will be adopting a trauma focus.

Does the rest of my child welfare system need to be trained before the resource parents?

Views are mixed about whether this should be a prerequisite. The key is for the child welfare system to be moving in this direction. From one perspective, the child welfare system should be trained in a trauma-based curriculum *before* resource parents. Child welfare staff are the first responders to children in crisis and should have a working understanding of trauma-based issues when children come into care. This trauma focus would enable them to make better informed decisions about treatment plans. On the other hand, especially in larger counties with complex child welfare systems, comprehensive systems change is an ongoing process.

It doesn't make sense to delay training resource parents until everyone else is trained; sometimes parents can be the best promoters of the training and can encourage others in the system to ask for trauma training as well. It is important to be strategic in staging training for different groups within the child welfare system. For example, if administrators are trained early and find the training valuable, they will be more likely to advocate that training be provided to their staff and resource parents. To the extent that training can occur simultaneously, both workers and caregivers will benefit from increased understanding of the impact of childhood traumatic experiences.

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How do you prevent attrition?

Experiences with attrition vary—from “a huge problem,” to “not a problem at all.” For example, one group held one of their earliest trainings in the summer, and they reported “almost zero attrition. Once families came to the first session and realized that we were providing a language and validation of their daily parenting experiences, they consistently showed up.” In contrast, another agency acknowledged, “We had no success with this issue. We actually had no parents complete the entire three series of sessions in order even though we offered the training in three locations.”

Tips for reducing attrition include:

- Make the training a requirement. In Colorado, for example, resource parents are required to receive 25 hours of training per year to keep their certification, a major incentive to attend. Providing continuing education units and/or state-mandated training hours to families can be a motivator. Agency staff who provide oversight for foster parents and who can give them credit for attendance should be involved in the recruitment process. It is imperative to get support from the child welfare agencies so that resource parents are encouraged (or required) to attend.
- Make the training *feel like* a requirement. Attrition can be minimized by the way in which the schedule is communicated to participants. For example, one group offered the training over four consecutive Tuesday nights and invited parents from two different foster care agencies. One agency told participants to “attend whatever they could.” Of those participants, many left sessions at the break, and few attended all four weeks. The participants from the other agency were told that they had to complete all sessions to get credit for any of them, and, as a result, everyone attended all four weeks.

When recruiting, make it clear immediately that if people sign up, they must commit to all sessions; let them know that if they can't make every single session they should withdraw from the entire training in order to allow someone on the wait list to take their slot. One trainer commented, “It is better to have only 25 people attend than to allow people to attend at will.’ You need to make the training appear to be valuable to have it taken seriously.”

- Provide food and childcare. If parents know they can bring their kids along and that they won't have to worry about getting dinner together beforehand, participating in this training is much simpler for them. One agency, for example, provided dinner for the entire family and provided a psycho-education group for the foster children while the resource parents were in training.

Makeup Sessions

One group who stressed the importance of attending every training session offered make-up sessions for those inevitable situations in which someone had an illness or crisis and missed a class. During the first session, trainers introduced and explained the procedure for making up sessions. Resource parent co-facilitators conducted the make-up sessions, which typically lasted one hour. Often people chose to meet immediately prior to the next class in a room adjacent to the training location. A valuable secondary benefit to conducting make-up sessions in this way is that it can enhance foster parent support networks: many families who have spent time together in this context have stayed in touch and continued to support one another in their efforts to use a trauma lens. In addition, as co-facilitators teach the material to other families, they deepen their own learning and personal integration of the material.

- Present the training as a professional enhancement. It is important to introduce the training as an enhancement of current parenting practices, not a replacement. Acknowledge that the children placed in resource parents' homes today are more behaviorally challenging than in years past and are exhibiting challenging behaviors at younger and younger ages.

Acknowledge parents' perception that that parenting skills utilized for birth children are not always effective for children in the child welfare system and that agencies are expecting more from resource parents in terms of skills and sophistication than ever before. As professional parents, they need this update on the latest advancements in caring for abused and neglected kids.

How do you create agency buy-in?

There are several primary ways to create agency buy-in to support this training.

- Show results. One of the best ways to create buy-in is to have a child in one of your homes do better than anticipated as a result of the resource parent's participation in the training. Supervisors seldom argue with success, regardless of the politics within a particular agency. Agency buy-in depends upon the effectiveness of the training. If it improves the satisfaction of foster parents, and their ability to help the children they serve, the value of the training will become apparent. When families feel more empowered to manage stressful situations, they are less likely to suffer disruptions in placement. When staff are empowered to reinforce these strategies, they can help maintain longer periods of stability in homes.

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- Make their jobs easier. When trying to create agency buy-in—either with child welfare systems, schools, or law enforcement, for example—it is useful to point out the ways in which this training might make their jobs easier and their caseloads more manageable. Although this is not a replacement for what is already being done in those agencies, the perspective offered in this training can enhance current practices and help achieve the goals of nearly everyone involved in “the system,” to help children heal and grow up to become successful and fully functioning adults.
- Identify champions. Some groups have been fortunate to have a committed advocate or champion for a trauma-informed approach at their local child welfare departments. Agency buy-in may be fostered by impassioned individuals who have become trauma-

informed champions in their communities and who can help build linkages between agencies and community partners.

- Offer training for staff. A good way to create agency buy-in is to provide trauma training to staff first. If a case manager receives information about trauma and sees the role that it plays in the lives of children on her caseload, her next thought is likely to be, “resource parents really need to hear this.” Often staff are seeking better strategies to enhance care for children who have experienced trauma, and they quickly understand the need for the team to be more trauma-informed. Another approach is to invite selected staff to observe the resource parent training. As one trainer recounted, “This typically results in a lot of positive press. I’ve had a number of people call me and ask if they could attend a training session because they had heard such wonderful things about it. This is obviously ideal in that demand grows faster than supply, and the perceived value of the material increases.” Trainers have also offered a brief (3-4 hours) “Trauma 101” training to staff at some larger agencies, to help them understand how the training might help them meet their goal of increased placement stability. Ideally this training should be offered for free and CE credits given.

What are the financial costs?

Costs associated with implementing the Resource Parent training include:

- Trainer time. For some, this training adds a significant amount of teaching and preparation time to established workloads. In an era of unprecedented caseloads, furloughs, and increasing documentation standards, this can be a tough sell unless trainers are compensated for their additional time.
- Materials, including printing the Participant Handbooks.
- Food or meals, ranging from snacks during sessions to full meals for resource parents and their children.
- Childcare. This might include providing a stipend or reimbursement to participating parents to cover their childcare costs, or could involve hiring staff or recruiting volunteers to supervise children on-site while their parents are in training. As one group described, “We had interns for the psychoeducation group for the older kids and volunteers from child welfare to assist with the supervision of the younger kids. There are clearly added costs and complexity when inviting resource parents to bring their children along with them to the training.”

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- Stipends for resource parent co-facilitators.
- Meeting costs, including audiovisual equipment and room rental.
- Incentives for resource parent attendees. Not all agencies have provided these, but some have done so as a way to encourage parent participation in this training, particularly if it not a formal requirement. Others have provided transportation support, for example, to help parents get to and from the training.
- Evaluation, including the cost of staff time enter evaluation data, conduct follow-ups, and analyze and write up the results.

In order to cover these costs, groups have had to be creative. For example, hosting agencies can sometimes tap into available resources to cover training space or seek out donations of time, space, or money which may be used to provide meals or snacks during a training day. As agencies implement these trainings, personal contacts and community networking can be key to securing the resources and monetary donations needed.

What makes an effective trainer?

Effective trainers possess a combination of training skills and personal characteristics. Among others, these include investment in the program, authenticity, flexibility, passion, commitment, creativity, and a desire to have a positive impact on their community. Effective trainers are good communicators, who can stay on agenda and true to the curriculum while adding their own style and personality and professional experience. Trainers must be willing to be flexible in responding to the audience's needs.

To deliver this training competently, trainers must be familiar with the content and hold a trauma-informed perspective. They should possess a solid working knowledge of both trauma and the child welfare system, as well as hands-on experience working with traumatized children. Trainers should prepare by reading and reviewing the written and visual materials. One trainer

Resource Parent Co-facilitators

Involving multiple resource parent co-facilitators can greatly enhance the learning experience. Co-facilitators are simply other foster parents who sit in on the training and are willing to share their experiences using a trauma lens successfully. Co-facilitators lend legitimacy and make the training feel more relevant for even the most resistant families. Another essential function of co-facilitators is to model “making mistakes” and recognizing them as learning moments rather than failures. One co-facilitator for every 5-6 participants is recommended. In order to recruit diverse co-facilitators, they are not asked to give any lectures but rather to sit in the audience and share their stories and perhaps lead small-group discussions. This approach encourages the participation of co-facilitators who are excited about using the material but would never agree to “public speaking” and/or who do not have time to prepare material in a more formal fashion.

commented that, “although the training is designed to be picked up and used without a formal train-the-trainer, in our experience it is much easier to conduct the training after having observed it.” Trainers must make a commitment to familiarizing themselves with the manual, in order to present the material smoothly and comfortably, without having to read the text verbatim or cause unnecessary delays.

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Finally, co-trainers must demonstrate a commitment to working together to plan and prepare for the training. In advance of the training, they should meet to discuss the material and divide responsibilities for the delivery of specific modules or content. Previous experience co-training together can be a plus.

Specifically, effective *resource parent* trainers are able to engage with participants by sharing their own experiences and also encouraging others to share theirs. Resource parents with their own trauma histories or who have difficulty containing their stories may need help structuring their input. Resource parent trainers should be relatively experienced (5+ years), so that they have plenty of examples to offer to supplement and support the curriculum content. The resource parent co-trainer must be committed to the idea of looking at children from a trauma-informed perspective.

What kinds of ongoing support are helpful?

Parents who participate in the training can provide ongoing support to one another, with or without formal structures in place. One agency, for example, has hired

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“It’s Not About You” Groups

The Resource Parent training is really just the “start of the conversation.” After six sessions, families are still going to struggle with this material and will need others to talk to if the goal is to truly alter parenting styles. In one community, families gathered to create an ongoing, open-enrollment, psycho-educational support group called “It’s Not About You.” The group meets monthly and is led by a foster parent who receives a small stipend for her time. The purpose of this group is to encourage families to continue sharing examples of ways in which they used a trauma lens. They can share frustrations over situations in which they don’t feel they are making progress. They can expand their repertoire of trauma-informed solutions to parenting challenges. Parents frequently comment that there is no other place in their existing social networks to discuss this kind of parenting, as their extended families and communities often don’t understand or are outright judgmental about their parenting choices. Families need to have a place where others “get it.”

resource parents to lead ongoing trauma-focused psychoeducation groups. These groups create another opportunity for families to share experiences and suggestions for bringing a trauma-informed approach to real-life parenting encounters. They capitalize on the idea that families who've successfully used a trauma lens are the most effective mentors to families mired in more rigid and/or traditional parenting styles. Ideally, parents would receive training credit (or other incentives) for attending these groups. In other agencies, parents have continued to serve as a support system for one another, even without the structure of a formal group.

Other recommendations for providing ongoing support include offering periodic “booster” trainings on trauma-informed parenting, as well as offering child-specific supports, such as assessment and trauma-focused interventions.

How much adaptation/modification of the curriculum is appropriate?

The materials are very adaptable, making them remarkably user friendly. Some customization is needed to tailor the material to the needs and background of the audience and the chosen training format. It is reasonable to add and/or omit selected topics, but consider carefully the implications of changes. The first three modules are foundational and should not be skipped. Depending on audience interests and needs, the later modules have been offered as “electives” in some situations, or shortened and combined. The best approach, however, is to offer the curriculum in order, in its entirety.

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What are the unintended consequences of this training, if any?

Some of the training's content can serve as trauma reminders for participants, and can trigger emotional and physical reactions. When participants become reactive, that can influence the group dynamics.

On the positive side, however, resource parents appear to really enjoy the connections that happen among group members. The experience of simply being around people who understand what they're facing and have faced it themselves is incredibly powerful.