



## HANDLING PAINFUL FEELINGS IN VISITS

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

# Fight or Flight

## Coping with sadness and anger in visits

Even though we love our children and want to see them, visiting children in foster care can bring up painful feelings for many parents. Sometimes visits are scary, stiff, weird, awkward, or sad. Our kids may act angry at us, or like they don't care. Walking into the agency can make us feel like a failure. If you were in foster care yourself as a child, visits can also bring up feelings of abandonment.

During visits, you may feel jumpy or angry from the get go. You may sit there without playing, feeling emotionless or spaced out. You may forget what you were doing. These can be signs of trauma.

### WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is an experience that makes a person feel that her life is threatened—or a loved one's life is in danger—and overwhelms a person's ability to cope. It's normal in traumatic moments to freeze or feel unable to respond, to feel that you are apart from your own body, or to react with overwhelming fear, anger, or even violence.

The most devastating trauma occurs when people who are supposed to love us and keep us safe do us harm. Physical or sexual abuse or domestic violence can make it hard for people to trust anyone. Trauma can also hurt how people feel about themselves, even though the abuse is not their fault.

### SIGNS OF STRESS RELATED TO TRAUMA

There are some common reactions to trauma:

**Avoidance:** trying to avoid reminders of a trauma, like not going to



a certain block, not seeing certain people, or not talking about it.

**"Hypervigilance":** staying "on alert" all of the time to try to stay safe, even if you're in danger.

**Overreacting:** reacting with anger, sadness, worry, or fear that is out of proportion to the situation.

**Under-reacting:** "just sitting there" emotionally or physically despite danger, such as showing no emotion after bad news.

**Changes in eating or sleeping:** too much or too little are both warning signs.

**Numbness:** feeling like you're not connected to yourself or not really there.

**"Losing time":** not being sure how you got from one place to another, or what happened to minutes or hours.

**Nightmares or bad memories** that seem to push in to your mind.

### TIP

Feeling helpless and overwhelmed can be a "trauma trigger" if you've had trauma in your past. Trauma doesn't have to keep hurting. Knowing about trauma—and getting treatment—can help you cope.

### DID YOU KNOW

Therapy can feel unsafe if you start by opening up wounds. When you have gone through trauma, the first step in therapy should be how to calm down and feel safe and in control.

### TIP

Being aware of what trauma is can help you cope and ask for help. Ask for a trauma screening and trauma-focused treatment if you think trauma is affecting you.



Jeanette Vega and her youngest son Joey

# 'Your Actions Are Setting You Back'

BY JEANETTE VEGA

When my oldest son was 2, he was removed because I hit him. Our first few visits were rough.

They felt like jail. Being watched and told how to talk or play with my own child drove me crazy. I felt so uncomfortable that I just wanted the visits to end.

I also felt as if I'd lost my son's love. He seemed scared of me. He would hesitate to hug me, or stay quiet, barely looking my way. I tried to imagine what was going through his little mind, asking myself, "Is my son rejecting me because he hates me? Does he think I'm a stranger?" I also blamed the agency and the foster mother for the change in my son. For so long at visits, I was so upset and angry that I found it hard to even try to engage my son.

To deal with my feelings, I tried to put up a front of "I am strong, nothing bothers me." But the pain and anger I had bottled up kept coming out. One time my son came in with stitches on his chin and I attacked the foster mother. Another time I cursed out a worker who threatened to end my visit. I was sent to "anger management class" three times.

Then, after a blow-up, a worker pulled me aside. "I am not here to argue with you," she said. "I just want you to understand that your actions are setting you back."

As we talked, it did sink in that the workers saw me as someone who would try to fix any situation with hitting, and my actions were hurting my case. I also knew that my son needed security. He was scared when I got angry.

It wasn't easy to get my feelings under control in visits, but I did it. I didn't want to be the cause of my son staying in care any longer.

## Calming Your Body to Heal

Trauma is about feeling abandoned and scared, not having life feel safe or predictable, and not having a voice or control of even part of your life.

Trauma lives in our bodies. Our brains try to keep our bodies from feeling that trauma. But our bodies may continue to experience agitation, rage and heartache. Those are all pieces of the past that haven't been laid to rest.

### LEARNING AND HEALING

Therapy can be an important part of trauma recovery, because when you've experienced trauma you need to find words for what happened to you. A therapist should help you feel safe to feel what you feel and encourage you to really be curious about yourself.

Healing is also about learning how to calm your body down. People who have experienced trauma often barely notice their bodies because their brains are used to cutting off their feelings. They may overeat or starve themselves. They may not notice when they're tired. Trauma resets the brain and makes many things harder, like concentration and calming down reactions. But it is possible to heal.

### NOTICING HOW YOUR BODY FEELS

Ask yourself: What will help you begin to notice the sensations in your body? Anything you do is good. Just sitting quietly and paying attention to your breathing is a step in the right direction. Meditation, Tai Chi and yoga can help. A trauma-focused therapist can help you focus on the body.

Once you start paying attention to your body, it's easier in difficult moments to take steps to care for yourself instead of getting too angry, scared, or shut down.

*From an interview by Plazadora Footman with Bessel Van Der Kolk, author of The Body Keeps Score.*



TIPS is brought to you by the parents at Rise, which trains parents to write and speak about their experiences with the foster care system.

For information and peer support, go to: [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org) or like us on Facebook: @readrisemag