



# WORKING WITH PARENTS/CAREGIVERS IN TRAUMA-FOCUSED THERAPY: A CONVERSATION GUIDE

## Introduction

Trauma-focused mental health services for children and adolescents teach management of strong emotions, reactions and behaviors connected to extremely difficult experiences. Parents/caregivers can be an invaluable part of the healing journey for children, adolescents, and families by expressing confidence in their ability to heal, supporting progress and demonstrating capacity to come to terms with the child's trauma experience.

## Purpose

This guide is designed to help providers talk with parents/caregivers about skills that are important for participating in trauma-focused therapy relationships with their children and families. It is meant to promote collaboration, positive engagement and shared understanding between providers and parents/caregivers. It focuses on four skill areas: Taking Care of Yourself, Managing Your Emotions, Responding to Others' Emotions and Managing Relationships. The skill areas build upon each other as the provider and parents/caregivers move up the skill development ladder.

## SKILLS LADDER



## How to Use This Guide

For each skill area:

- » Read the skill description and example provided.
- » Use the introduction script to inform the parent/caregiver of your purpose.
- » Use the sample discussion questions (and ones you generate on your own) to start and expand conversations with parents/caregivers.
- » Be prepared to ask good follow up questions.

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## 1. Taking Care of Yourself

### Skill description

- » Thinking of yourself as a person separate from others.
- » Placing value on attending to your own basic needs.
- » Speaking about independent thoughts, reactions and experiences.
- » Asserting personal preferences.

## Example

In one situation, the provider was working with a parent who was experiencing such high levels of stress that she had trouble recognizing how stressed out she was. She'd come into sessions with her child and quickly get overwhelmed by her strong emotions but had difficulty considering what resources she might have to help herself calm down. This interfered with her ability to begin working on her child's issues. Focusing on the first set of discussion questions helped the provider work with parent to increase her sense of control and start to do some problem-solving.



### Introduction script:

Parents/caregivers often have a hard time taking care of themselves, especially when managing day to day stress and their own reactions trauma exposures. For this part of our meeting, I will be asking you questions about how you focus on yourself, your basic needs and decisions you have to make.

### Sample discussion questions:

- » How was it getting here today?
- » Did you consider not coming to our meeting today? If so, what were you thinking about not coming? *If not*, what were you thinking our meeting would be like today?
- » Who else knows you are here today?
  - o Is there someone else whom you'd like to include in our meetings?
- » How have you been taking care of yourself lately? Eating, sleeping, staying hydrated?
- » Who in your life pays attention to how you take care of yourself?
  - o How would you like to be taking care of yourself and what is interfering?

*As you are listening, find a strength to comment on, such as being observant or thoughtful, and be curious about whether the parent/caregiver agrees.*

## 2. Managing Your Emotions

### Skill Description

- » Expressing a full range of feelings/emotions appropriate to the situation in a way that is physically and emotionally safe for self and others.
- » Tolerating emotionally challenging situations rather than avoiding them because of difficult emotions or associated stress.

### Example:

In one situation, the parent was quick to anger which escalated into verbal threats with profanity, putting her into conflict the DSS worker involved with her family. On a couple of occasions, she went from verbal to physical threats which caused her to be banned from her part time job. During visits to the clinic, this pattern got in the way of sessions with her child. Over time and with support, discussions using the questions below helped her calmly identify the connection between feeling disrespected and lashing out.

### Introduction script:

Being a parent/caregiver is hard and learning to manage stress and your own strong feelings are important

skills. For this part of our meeting, I will be asking you questions about your feelings and how you notice and manage them.

**Sample discussion questions:**

- » When day to day life is stressful, what do you notice about how are you are reacting?
  - o What are the ways you try to manage?
  - o What works best for you?
- » Do other people, adults and children, notice when they see that you are stressed?
  - o Who notices first? How do they let you know?
- » When you find yourself crying or yelling a lot, is that the kind of response you want to be having?

### 3. Responding to Others' Emotions

**Skill Description**

- » Understanding that another person experiences emotions different from your own in response to the same situation or interaction.
- » Tolerating hearing other points of view and emotional responses.
- » Generating a range of explanations for events, rather than only being able to consider own individual point of view.



**Example:**

In one situation, the two parents were having a hard time hearing from their child about the details of his trauma experience. Each blamed the other and neither could consider the other's point of view. Using the discussion questions in this section helped the provider work with the parents in a non-judgmental way and without taking sides. Soon, they were ready to hear their child tell his story about being sexually abused, including his reaction.

**Introduction script:**

Relating to others requires recognizing and accepting others' points of view. For this part of the meeting, I will be asking you questions about what you notice about yourself when you are interacting with others.

**Sample discussion questions:**

- » What thoughts or reactions did you have about\_\_\_\_\_?
- » How did you communicate your thoughts and reactions to\_\_\_\_\_?
  - o What thoughts or reactions did\_\_\_\_\_have to the same situation?
  - o Were you surprised to hear his/her point of view and feelings about a particular situation? What surprised you?
- » Can you give two guesses about what might be causing his/her reaction?
  - o How is it similar or different from what you would have expected or what was going on with you in that same situation?
  - o How will you find out what is really going on?

## 4. Managing Relationships

### Skill Description:

- » Communicates expectations of others, holds others accountable for their own actions, and initiates conversations regarding conflicts with others in a safe and effective way.
- » Sets clear boundaries and seeks support and guidance from an expanding social circle.
- » Engages in help seeking behaviors both within and outside of the service relationship.

### Example:

In one situation, the caregiver was exhausted and in ill health while maintaining a household for her adult children and their children. She was “on call” to their needs and requests every day and night. She had some support from the father of her children but he too tended to indulge their children. Using questions like the ones below led to conversations about feeling consumed by the caregiving role and a new determination to establish and enforce rules of her household as a starting place for change. This in turn benefited the teenage grandchild she was raising.

### Introduction script:

Being a parent/caregiver (providing care, teaching right and wrong, maintaining routines, advocating for services, dealing with teachers) requires staying clear about where you stand in relationships and managing conflict effectively. For this part of our discussion, I will be asking questions about your comfort with setting limits with others and being open about your needs and expectations.

### Sample discussion questions:

- » Was there ever a time you spoke up for yourself and felt good about the outcome?
- » When did you realize you weren't comfortable with the interaction you were having with \_\_\_\_\_?
  - What made you realize you weren't comfortable?
  - How did you decide to let the person know or not let the person know?
  - What were your options for how to let the person know?
  - If you were to communicate that you weren't comfortable, how would you do it?

## Using this guide

Now that you have read through the guide, you may be thinking of times it could be useful. Here is a list of suggestions to consider:

### 1. Supporting Therapy Process

- » At the beginning of a therapy relationship.
- » To determine if individual adult therapy might be helpful.
- » When it seems like progress towards goals is stalled.
- » When it is time to update treatment goals.
- » When going from one stage to another in an evidenced-based practice.
- » Towards the end of a treatment relationship to mark progress.



## 2. Supporting Parent/Caregiver Skill Development

- » To promote parent/caregiver curiosity about self and others.
- » To encourage parent/caregiver to consider feelings that may underlie child's behavior.
- » To encourage improved teamwork between co-parents/co-caregivers.

## 3. In Times of Stress or Transition

- » When an increase in parent/caregiver stress interferes with participation in sessions.
- » When there has been a stressful family event.
- » When there has been a change in the caregiving system, i.e. new adoptive or foster parent.
- » When parents are preparing to reunify with children after period of separation such as incarceration or foster care placement.

## References

Gardner, S., Loya, T., & Hyman, C. (2012). FamilyLive: Parental skill building for caregivers with interpersonal trauma exposures. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 42(1), 81-89.

### About FITT & CRF

The Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (FITT) Center at the University of Maryland partners with families, providers and local and national networks to increase behavioral health equity for children and families who have experienced chronic trauma and stress. <http://fittcenter.umaryland.edu>



The Center for Resilient Families, part of the Institute for Translational Research in Children's Mental Health at the University of Minnesota, aims to bring evidence-based parenting practices into practice for parents across the country, and raise awareness about the importance of parenting. <http://crf.umn.edu>



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## Other useful resources:

### Getting Help After Trauma: Is My Family Ready?

Created for parent/caregivers to determine readiness for participation in trauma-focused services. It's meant to address concerns about sharing personal and family information regarding past or recent traumatic exposures and bringing up strong emotions or exposing both past and present difficulties.

Link: [crf.umn.edu/readiness](http://crf.umn.edu/readiness)

### What's Sharing Power Got to Do With Trauma-Informed Practice? Sharing Power Tip Sheet and Reflection Tool

Created to assist providers build skills for engaging with families using a shared power approach that addresses concerns parents/caregivers may have about feeling judged or feeling a loss of control in the relationship. Link: [nctsn.org/resources/sharing-power-tool-reflection](http://nctsn.org/resources/sharing-power-tool-reflection)