

The Invisible Suitcase: Behavioral Challenges of Traumatized Children

The Invisible Suitcase

Children who enter the foster care system typically arrive with at least a few personal belongings: clothes, toys, pictures, etc. But many also arrive with another piece of baggage, one that they are not even aware they have: an “invisible suitcase” filled with the beliefs they have about themselves, the people who care for them, and the world in general.

For children who have experienced trauma—particularly the abuse and neglect that leads to foster care—the **invisible suitcase is often filled with overwhelming negative beliefs and expectations**. Beliefs not only about themselves . . .

- I am worthless.
- I am always in danger of being hurt or overwhelmed.
- I am powerless.

But also about you as a caregiver . . .

- You are unresponsive.
- You are unreliable.
- You are, or will be, threatening, dangerous, rejecting.

You didn’t create the invisible suitcase, and the beliefs inside aren’t personally about you. But understanding its contents is critical to your helping your child to overcome the effects of trauma and establish healthy relationships.

The Invisible Suitcase and Behavior

The negative beliefs and expectations that fill the invisible suitcase permeate every aspect of a child’s life. Children who have been through trauma take their invisible suitcases with them to school, into the community, everywhere they go. They have learned through painful experience that it is not safe to trust or believe in others, and that is it best not to give relationships a chance.

As a result, children who have experienced trauma often exhibit extremely challenging behaviors and reactions that can be overwhelming for resource parents. These problems may include aggression, outbursts of anger, trouble sleeping, and difficulty concentrating. Very often, the behavior problems that are the most difficult to handle—those that may even threaten the child’s placement in your home—come from the invisible suitcase and its impact on relationships. One way of understanding why this happens is the concept of reenactment.

Reenactment is the habit of recreating old relationships with new people. Reenactments are behaviors that evoke in caregivers some of the same reactions that traumatized children experienced with other

adults, and so lead to familiar—albeit negative—interactions. Just as traumatized children’s sense of themselves and others is often negative and hopeless, their reenactment behaviors can cause the new adults in their lives to feel negative and hopeless about the child.

Why Do Children Reenact?

Children who engage in reenactments are not consciously choosing to repeat painful or negative relationships. The behavior patterns children exhibit during reenactments have become ingrained over time because they:

- Are familiar and helped the child survive in other relationships
- “Prove” the negative beliefs in the invisible suitcase, by provoking the same reactions the child experienced in the past. **(A predictable world, even if negative, may feel safer than an unpredictable one.)**
- Help the child vent frustration, anger, and anxiety
- Give the child a sense of mastery over the old traumas

Many of the behaviors that are most challenging for resource parents are strategies that in the past may have helped the child survive in the presence of abusive or neglectful caregivers. Unfortunately, these once-useful strategies can undermine the development of healthy relationships with new people and only reinforce the negative messages contained in the invisible suitcase.

What Resource Parents Can Do

Remember the suitcase

Keep in mind that the children placed in your home are likely to re-use the strategies they learned in situations of abuse and neglect. Because of their negative beliefs, children with an invisible suitcase have learned to elicit adult involvement through acting out and problem behavior. These behaviors may evoke intense emotions in you, and you may feel pushed in ways you never expected. Some common reactions in resource parents include:

- Urges to reject the child
- Abusive impulses towards the child
- Emotional withdrawal and depression
- Feelings of incompetence/helplessness
- Feeling like a bad parent

This can lead to a vicious cycle in which the child requires more and more of your attention and involvement, but the relationship is increasingly strained by the frustration and anger both you and the child now feel. If left unchecked, this cycle can lead to still more negative interactions, damaged relationships, and confirmation of all the child’s negative beliefs about him-/herself and others. In some cases, placements are ended. And the suitcase just gets heavier.

Provide disconfirming experiences

Preventing the vicious cycle of negative interactions requires patience and self-awareness. Most of all, it requires a concerted effort to respond to the child in ways that challenge the invisible suitcase and provide the child with new, positive messages. Messages that tell the child:

- You are worthwhile and wanted.
- You are safe.
- You are capable.

And messages that say you, as a caregiver:

- Are available and won't reject him/her.
- Are responsive and won't abuse him/her.
- Will protect him/her from danger.
- Will listen and understand him/her.

For more on helping foster children who have been through trauma, see:

Delaney, R. (1998). *Fostering changes: Treating attachment-disordered foster children* (2nd ed.). Oklahoma City, OK: Wood 'N' Barnes Publishing.

Kagan, R. (2004). *Rebuilding attachments with traumatized children*. New York: The Haworth Press, Inc.

This does not mean giving children a free pass on their negative behaviors. As a parent, you must still hold children accountable, give consequences, and set expectations. But with the invisible suitcase in mind, you balance correction with praise, and deliver consequences without the negative emotions that may be triggered by the child's reenactments.

- Praise even the simplest positive or neutral behaviors. Provide at least 6 instances of warm, sincere praise for each instance of correction.
- Stay calm and dispassionate when correcting the child. Use as few words as possible and use a soft, matter-of-fact tone of voice.
- Be aware of your own emotional response to the child's behavior. If you cannot respond in a calm, unemotional fashion, step away until you can.
- Don't be afraid to repeat corrections (and praise) as needed. Learning new strategies and beliefs takes time.

Establish a dialogue

The strategies that maltreated children develop to get their needs met may be brilliant and creative, but too often are personally costly. They need to learn that there is a better way. Children need to learn that they can talk about the underlying feelings and beliefs contained in their invisible suitcase. They need to understand that you as the caregiver can tolerate these expressions without the common reactions they have come to expect from adults: rejection, abuse, abandonment. Help children learn words to describe their emotions and feelings and encourage them to express those feelings. When the contents of the invisible suitcase have been unpacked and examined, reenactments and negative cycles are less likely to occur.

The Suitcase and You: Tips for Avoiding Compassion Fatigue

Caring for traumatized children and adolescents can take quite a toll on resource parents. Remember that paying attention to your own feelings and needs is just as important as attending to the needs of your child. Without proper self-care, you can become physically, mentally, and emotionally worn out—as if you are carrying the child’s traumas all on your own shoulders. Some people call this “compassion fatigue.”

When this happens, you may experience:

- Increased irritability or impatience with the child
- Denial of the impact traumatic events have had on the child
- Feelings of numbness or detachment
- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts about the child’s past traumas that don’t lessen over time
- Dreams about the child’s traumas
- The desire to get away from the child or get the child out of your home

If you experience any of these signs for more than two to three weeks, seek counseling with a professional who is knowledgeable about trauma. To avoid compassion fatigue, take the following preemptive steps.

- **Beware of isolation.** Successful resource parents know that they cannot go it alone when caring for children with trauma. Work in a team, talk to other foster parents and therapists, and ask for support.
- **Accept your reactions.** All too often, resource parents judge themselves as weak or incompetent for having strong reactions to a child’s trauma. These feelings are not a sign of weakness or incompetence; rather, they can be the cost of caring.
- **Work on understanding and processing your own traumas.** Adults with a history of unresolved traumatic experiences are more at risk for compassion fatigue. Seek help to make sure your own traumatic history and reactions to trauma reminders don’t get in the way of your being an effective parent.
- **Keep your perspective.** Remember, you are not *just* a resource parent. Make time to interact with children and adolescents who have not been maltreated, to socialize with adult friends, and to find joy in every day. Be sure to laugh often.

Adapted from “The Invisible Suitcase” by Jennifer Wilgocki, MS, LCSW and Jim Van Den Brandt, LCSW, ACSW.

For more information on the impact of trauma on children,
visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at www.NCTSN.org.