

# Implementing Trauma Systems Therapy for Foster Care (TST-FC)

A GUIDE FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



APRIL 2017

## **TST-FC: A TRAUMA-INFORMED CAREGIVING APPROACH**

Trauma Systems Therapy for Foster Care (TST-FC) is a skill-building, trauma-focused curriculum for foster parents, including kin and other caregivers. TST-FC was adapted from Trauma Systems Therapy, developed by Dr. Glenn Saxe of NYU's Child Study Center, and written by Kelly McCauley.

## **TST-FC CURRICULUM**

The four-session TST curriculum is available free of charge from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In addition to this implementation guide, the curriculum includes:

- Four training presentations
- Four facilitator guides
- A foster parent resource guide
- Facilitator preparation and planning
- Survey and feedback materials

## **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

For more information about TST-FC, please contact the Child Welfare Strategy Group at [webmail@aecf.org](mailto:webmail@aecf.org).

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# thank you

## **THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN TRAUMA SYSTEMS THERAPY FOR FOSTER CARE!**

Children and teens in out-of-home placements fare better when child welfare systems have more — and better-supported — foster families, including kin caregivers. While this seems obvious, over the years, child welfare agencies have been challenged to recruit and retain — and especially to support — sufficient numbers of caregivers for all the children in their care.

With this in mind, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is excited to share Trauma Systems Therapy for Foster Care (TST-FC). TST-FC is a promising curriculum that supports caregivers in their critical roles. TST-FC was piloted in two public child welfare agencies in 2015 and evaluated by Child Trends, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center. Foster parents, caseworkers and supervisors who used it found it immediately helpful in understanding and supporting children and teens in their care.

TST-FC includes detailed facilitator guides, training presentations, handouts, a foster parent guide and other tools, including sample pre- and post-surveys and feedback forms. TST-FC is a high-quality, skill-building curriculum that adds a trauma focus to your agency's array of foster parent resources.

TST-FC has benefits beyond training. Its framework for addressing trauma is best used when implemented throughout your agency to give staff and foster parents a shared language for discussing children's needs, guiding caregiving strategies and bringing an understanding of trauma into treatment conferences and family meetings. It also gives your agency a way to involve foster parents as frontline practitioners, bringing their expertise and commitment front and center as you work together to help children and teens thrive.

The Casey Foundation offers another curriculum package, the nine-session ARC Reflections, which also provides hands-on, trauma-focused skills for caregivers. The Foundation's aim is to provide quality choices that help sustain caregivers in their important roles, maintain stable placements and promote healing and permanency.

The Casey Foundation hopes your agency will use this curriculum and share it widely with colleagues and partners. Child welfare systems and programs throughout the country are helping children and families thrive, and it is the Foundation's honor and pleasure to offer this resource to support you.

Sincerely,

**Tracey Feild**

*Managing Director*

Child Welfare Strategy Group

The Annie E. Casey Foundation



# introduction

Over the past decade, child welfare systems across the country have been transforming their agencies to be more sensitive and responsive to trauma.<sup>1</sup> However, foster parents<sup>2</sup> and kin — the team members who spend the most time with children placed in their homes — are often the last to learn about the impact of trauma on child behavior and the last to learn skills that can help them parent children and teens who have experienced trauma.

We know the impact of trauma has far-reaching consequences for children and caregivers. Caregivers need to know that trauma affects development, behavior and, most importantly, relationships. Fortunately, there are approaches to treating traumatic stress for children and teens that are available to the general public and now, with the help of this guide, to child welfare practitioners.

Trauma Systems Therapy for Foster Care (TST-FC) is a skills-based parenting curriculum for caregivers of children and teens in foster care. This guide is a primer for child welfare agencies planning to install the curriculum within their existing array of in-service foster care trainings. The guide includes two parts:

- **Part I: Installing TST-FC in a public child welfare system** describes components of TST-FC and the required logistics and planning for a TST-FC roll out.
- **Part II: Implementation considerations** shares lessons learned from jurisdictions that have piloted TST-FC.

## WHAT IS TRAUMA SYSTEMS THERAPY?

Trauma Systems Therapy (TST) is a comprehensive approach to helping children exposed to trauma regain emotional regulation. It has been successfully implemented in nonprofit agencies across the country.

Recently, TST has been adapted for use with kin and non-relative foster parents of children in traditional and treatment-level foster care. This adaptation — TST-FC — is a collaboration between the Annie E. Casey Foundation, NYU Child Study Center and KVC Health Systems, Inc. TST-FC seeks to help:

- foster parents and kin gain parenting skills to support children with trauma histories using a skills-based training curriculum;
- children improve their well-being while living in stable placements and moving toward permanence; and
- agencies retain dedicated, skilled foster parents.





# part I

## Installing TST-FC in a Public Child Welfare System

### ABOUT TST-FC

Trauma Systems Therapy is a model of care for children who have experienced trauma. It addresses both the child's emotional needs and his or her social environment, with roots in developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. TST is both a clinical and an organizational model that emphasizes breaking down barriers between services, understanding the child's trauma symptoms in his or her developmental context and building on existing family strengths.<sup>3</sup>

TST-FC is based on TST principles and is designed to be a freestanding parenting course. It can also be delivered in conjunction with TST as a child treatment intervention, as described in Appendix Two. To learn more about TST, visit the TST website<sup>4</sup> and see the report, *Evaluation and Implementation of Trauma Systems Therapy-FC in a Public Child Welfare Setting*, by Child Trends. Additional materials can also be found at [kvc.org](http://kvc.org).

### WHY TST-FC?

Foster parents, including kin, can benefit from furthering their knowledge and skills about children's complex behavioral health needs. To do this, they must be supported by — and contribute to — the work of agency professionals.

The TST-FC curriculum makes this possible through four modules that cover 1) the impact of trauma, 2) strategies to address trauma, 3) coping with difficult behavior and 4) generating signals of safety. Modules One and Two are 2.5 hours in length. Modules Three and Four are 2 hours in length. The curriculum is designed to develop foster parents' understanding of traumatic stress, increase adult and children's emotional regulation and problem-solving skills and provide tools that support parenting.

Additional benefits of TST-FC include:

- Providing tools for foster parents. Trauma treatment concepts are translated into tools that can help the foster family support children's emotional regulation.
- Focusing on teamwork and supporting the emotional needs of the foster parents, professionals and para-professionals who work to help children and teens.

### 10 TST PRINCIPLES

Agencies that use TST as a systemwide child treatment intervention follow the model's key principles.

1. Fix a broken system
2. Put safety first
3. Create clear, focused plans that are based on facts
4. Do not go before you are ready
5. Put scarce resources where they will work
6. Insist on accountability — particularly your own
7. Align with reality
8. Take care of yourself and your team
9. Build from strength
10. Leave a better system

## IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

- Create implementation team
- Develop communication plan and messaging for stakeholders and staff
- Identify trainers and plan training-of-trainers sessions
- Identify and engage all stakeholders
- Create plan for engaging foster and kin caregivers
- Collect data (from pre- and post-surveys and feedback forms) and adjust training logistics in response

## DOLLARS AND CENTS

Adding a new training curriculum requires a financial investment. Plan for costs related to:

- Staff time
- Child care
- Meals
- Location costs
- Training materials

## AGENCY READINESS

Agency support for foster and kin caregivers begins with agency leaders. Leaders must value and prioritize foster parents and provide the right mix of resources to ensure they have the necessary skills and support to succeed. Leadership buy-in is critical to TST-FC, which is designed to increase teamwork among adults, from foster parents and caseworkers to other professionals who are focused on helping a child or teen to thrive.

Agency leaders and the foster parent training department need to be able to:

- talk confidently about TST-FC and how it will benefit caregivers, staff and children;
- designate staff to support foster parents;
- identify a team of champions to be responsible for implementing and sustaining foster parent training;
- clarify roles and responsibilities for casework teams that support foster parents;
- provide flexible funding for any needed child care, meals or other supports; and
- access community and neighborhood resources to help support foster parents in their parenting roles.

Staff participating in TST-FC should include those who work directly with children and youth in foster care and with foster and kinship caregivers, including frontline investigators, child welfare caseworkers and mental health providers. For ideas on sharing TST-FC with stakeholders, see Appendix Two.

## AGENCY INTEGRATION

TST-FC is more than just another in-service training option for foster parents. It incorporates a framework for addressing child traumatic stress that can be installed throughout your agency. In addition to serving as a skill-building tool for foster parents, TST-FC gives staff and foster parents a shared language to discuss children and youth. Staff who have been trained can also bring a trauma lens into treatment conferences, family meetings and collaborations with community partners.

To achieve maximum benefit from TST-FC, develop a communications plan to identify messages, steps and a timeline for informing staff, foster parents, kin and other partners about TST-FC and how implementation will involve them. Share the benefits of TST-FC, reaching agency administrators, managers and supervisors, management from community mental health agencies or providers and other key stakeholders positioned to improve their systems or services. Review and update agency policies, structures and practices as needed to increase the trauma competence of your organization.

## LOGISTICS AND PLANNING

There are three phases of installing TST-FC: planning, training and evaluation.



We recommend three to six months of planning, messaging and training staff before inviting foster parents and kin to their first TST-FC training. Ideally, make one person responsible for the entire project, preferably someone with decision-making authority, such as a program manager. Once an agency workgroup is chosen, trainers can be identified and prepared to deliver the new curriculum. Barriers to participation can be identified and addressed, then foster parents can be invited and trained.

The remainder of this guide focuses on considerations that can affect the success of the TST-FC as both a training approach and a new practice for supporting to foster parents.

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**TST-FC is an in-service training curriculum. It has been found to be most valuable to families who have some experience caring for children with trauma histories. It is not intended to be a replacement for comprehensive pre-service training for new foster families.**

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# part II



## Implementation Considerations

### PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

For TST-FC to become an essential element of your foster parent training program, its core principles must be embedded throughout your entire system. There must be a continuous emphasis on the need for teamwork on behalf of each child. Your agency must build a culture that supports the caregivers and caseworkers who do this difficult work. And it is critical to ensure that everyone in contact with kids and caregivers, from service providers to judges and others, understands the impact of trauma on child development and behavior.

Another important early task is deciding which data should be collected to track whether the training is having the intended result. For example, it's important to know the number of active homes your agency has as training begins, the number of parents trained in TST-FC and the number and percentage of those TST-FC-trained parents without a placement disruption who have maintained placement over a predetermined period of time (a quarter or a fiscal or calendar year). It is important to track foster parent retention rates. Knowing that racial disparities are common throughout the child welfare system, the agency should collect all data by race and ethnicity to determine whether your training is benefiting all families or some more than others. This will help you identify whether aspects of the training need to be adapted to better target your caregiver population.

Data can help you determine if this training influences foster home retention and placement stability over time. Eventually, it will also help you tell the story of how TST-FC, and the changes it has made in your agency, is benefiting children and families. This is a key element of sustainability. For a sample data collection template, see Appendix Three.

Your agency can implement and sustain TST-FC without additional technical assistance support, since all materials are available free of charge online. But if you'd like help, communicate directly with the curriculum developers: find contact information on the inside front cover of this guide.

### WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE TST-FC SUCCESSFUL?

TST-FC is an interactive curriculum that comes alive with experienced trainers who have a background in trauma, experience with parenting and a knack for storytelling. A training-of-trainers (TOT) process is needed to prepare trainers to deliver the curriculum. We recommend developing a 4–5 day TOT process

#### DATA COLLECTION SUGGESTIONS

- Number of homes approved/certified/closed
- Types of homes in which children are placed
- Percent of homes closed due to adoption, foster parent decision or agency decision
- Number of homes trained in TST-FC
- Number of children in TST-FC homes on first day of period
- Number of children who exited a TST-FC home during period
- Reasons why children exited TST-FC homes during period

to allow trainers to learn the curriculum, practice delivery and solve any issues that arise.

The TOT process can also help you determine whether to allot more time to some sessions. Trainers who participated in the TST-FC pilot suggested that, depending on how many foster parents are in your group, you may wish to lengthen sessions 1 and 2 to 3 hours to allow for more discussion and review.

Using seasoned staff and foster parent trainers adds value to the curriculum, as does finding creative ways to present the information. The right mixture and number of foster parents is also important. Twelve parents per group is optimal but up to 25 participants can work if sessions are carefully planned. Please see Appendix One for a list of trainer competencies.

### CAREGIVERS ARE AWESOME CO-TRAINERS

It may take more work to involve foster parents and kin as TST-FC co-trainers. But the benefits are huge. These caregivers can:

- Vouch for the information being provided
- Help their peers navigate your system
- Relate to first-time foster parents
- Share stories with their peers

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

In 2015, the Casey Foundation piloted TST-FC with more than 100 foster parents in two public child welfare agencies. Below you will find five lessons learned from this implementation:

- Preparation is key
- Plan to celebrate success
- Select the right trainers
- Communicate like crazy
- Think about sustainability

#### Preparation is key

It's important to take into account staff workload and capacity. An extensive time commitment is necessary to get TST-FC up and running and woven into your agency's practice and culture. Some tips to consider:

- A small implementation team (the agency workgroup) requires at least a representative from senior leadership, the training department and a resource worker.
- To create your work plan, work backwards from the number of caregivers that you want to train. Make sure to include information on communications deadlines and when the agency will hold its TOT. Allow plenty of time to prepare copies of training materials, find space for and invite foster parents.
- Having the right space (and food!) can improve the experience for participants.
- Making the training mandatory underscores its importance and improves attendance.
- Prior to a training session, make sure there are enough materials for everyone. And make sure the audiovisual is working so everyone can see the PowerPoints!
- Consider hosting a TST-FC information session to kick off this new type of support for caregivers.

### **Plan to celebrate success and support foster parents as needed**

The impact of the curriculum was enhanced when caseworkers who work with the caregivers were involved in and aware of the training content so they could follow up with families who were struggling with the concepts or simply wanted to talk more. Also, think about how you will celebrate when staff and foster parents finish the TST-FC module. Be thoughtful about what will be meaningful — and find ways to applaud success.

### **Select the right trainers**

Trainers must be well versed in complex trauma and child development. Some tips:

- Allow trainers time to learn the curriculum. If possible, allow them to practice training the curriculum with a live test audience as part of the TOT process.
- Encourage trainers to bring their own examples and experiences to the curriculum.
- Train broadly. Train kin and foster parents. Train staff, including kin, foster care and adoption workers and other case-carrying staff. Why? That way they can see immediate connections to their work and use the same language to talk about key concepts.
- Determine whether you want to train all caregivers — kin and otherwise — together or separately.
- Customize. Flexibility is key. Use the facilitator materials as a guide. For example, while the modules are written as 2-2.5-hour sessions, you may decide to lengthen sessions 1 and 2 to 3 hours. Likewise, if you see concepts that would work better as an activity than a lecture, test your theory!

### **Communicate like crazy**

If you want everyone to be aware of the impact of trauma on children and the adults who care for them, you need buy-in from supervisors, staff, youth, birth parents, resource parents and foster families. Some tips:

- Track foster parent experiences with the curriculum. Use pre- and post-surveys to measure knowledge, approval and feedback.
- Consider investing in reusable posters and other visual reminders about trauma-informed care and the language of TST-FC. See Appendices Four, Five and Six for ideas.

### **Think about sustainability**

TST-FC is both a systems approach and a training curriculum. To see its benefits, embed it and its team approach throughout your agency, incorporating trauma-informed practice and policy agency-wide and offering TST-FC as an ongoing complement to other in-service trainings.

If implemented well, TST-FC can lead to improvements in your system's ability to provide trauma-informed services, reduce placement disruptions and foster parent turnover and allow children and their caregivers to focus on relationship building and permanence. Foster parents will feel more confident in their ability to parent. Children and teens will be supported in processing their experiences and building emotional regulation and problem-solving skills.





# conclusion



## **FOSTER PARENTS AS FRONTLINE PRACTITIONERS: A PHILOSOPHY**

For most children in out-of-home placements, foster parents are the child welfare system's primary intervention. Caregivers — both foster parents, kin and others — are the face of that intervention. When communities and agencies support foster parents — by helping them build stronger caregiving skills and including them in all aspects of a child's life — children and teens have a better chance to heal. Everyone benefits when agencies regard kin and other foster parents as frontline practitioners who are valued members of an agency's team.

The Casey Foundation and TST-FC developers envision TST-FC as a model that will enable caregivers to better meet the needs of children and teens. By giving traditional and treatment foster parents more trauma-informed training and hands-on skills for managing child and teen behavior, research shows kids will disrupt less from their foster or kin homes and be better able to build stronger relationships and move toward permanence.

To move decisively in this direction, your agency can develop and maintain a cadre of professionals — staff, foster parents and kinship caregivers — who can competently identify trauma symptoms and provide appropriate supports to children exposed to trauma. Implementing a system-wide trauma focus, as TST-FC does, can be critical to developing well-prepared, confident foster parents and caseworkers who know how to work together as a team and to ensuring that children and teens who have experienced trauma can thrive, now and in the future.



# appendices

## APPENDIX ONE: RECOMMENDED TRAINER COMPETENCIES<sup>5</sup>

Each TST-FC session is led by two co-trainers. Each is responsible for collaborating to conduct the training. What makes for a good trainer? Professional trainers can be excellent, as can foster parents and agency staff. We strongly recommend having at least one professional trainer in each session plus a foster or kin caregiver.

Make sure both trainers understand they will play an important role in customizing and evaluating the training. Trainers should understand and be able to apply **basic instructional design principles** (such as how to organize the training to effectively share information and engage diverse participants) and **learning theory** (such as being aware of various learning styles, adult learner motivations and techniques of experiential learning) to the design and presentation of the curriculum.

Effective trainers will be able to:

- Practice creative and effective training techniques, including involving participants in activities and discussions and using a variety of approaches to accommodate learning styles and motivate participants.
- Present ideas clearly, concisely and effectively and demonstrate a passion for transferring knowledge and understanding to participants.
- Demonstrate commitment to becoming more knowledgeable about unfamiliar aspects of childhood trauma, grief and loss.
- Plan and prepare for training sessions efficiently, including preparation of the room and materials, as well as gathering information about participants.
- Demonstrate sensitivity, respect and professionalism, as well as patience and empathy for diverse groups of participants; be able to listen actively for learner input.
- Be an active participant in the evaluation of the training, accept feedback on effectiveness of the training and seek opportunities to improve techniques and behavior.
- Be comfortable addressing difficult conversations, including how race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity affect children and their caregivers.

**APPENDIX TWO: INTRODUCING TST TO COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

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**Sample Press Release**

Date: XX.XX.XXXX

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact Person: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The [name of agency] looks forward to helping foster and kin parents become even more amazing caregivers.

Beginning on [date], [agency name] will begin offering foster and kin caregivers a training called Trauma Systems Therapy for Foster Care (TST-FC). This four-session, 8-10 hour training has two goals: To help foster parents provide a nurturing and responsive environment for young people in their care and increase the agency's level of support for caregivers. Ultimately, the aim is to keep children stable in their placements so they can thrive and build relationships crucial to their development.

"We understand that small changes can have a big impact on the lives of children and teens," says [name of agency spokesperson]. "Kids in foster care, many of whom have experienced traumatic events in their lives, benefit when their caregivers learn how trauma affects children's behavior."

TST-FC training introduces caregivers to basic information on trauma and helps them build a personal toolbox for coping when children experience common fight, flight and freeze responses. The approach was piloted in two counties before being introduced in [name of local jurisdiction]. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a national philanthropic organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and families, provides the curriculum for free.

"As an agency, we are committed both to helping caregivers gain knowledge of trauma's effect on their children and to spreading such knowledge to staff members at our agency and the providers who work with our kids every day," says [spokesperson]. "Foster parents and community providers are key members of this agency's helping team. We hope this training and this approach to working with kids goes a long way to supporting and acknowledging the important work they do every day."

**APPENDIX THREE: SAMPLE DATA SUMMARY REPORT<sup>6</sup>**

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Find an Excel spreadsheet your agency can use or adjust here:  
<http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-TSTQuarterlyDataSpreadsheet-2017.xls>

**APPENDIX FOUR: TST-FC PROMOTIONAL FLYER**

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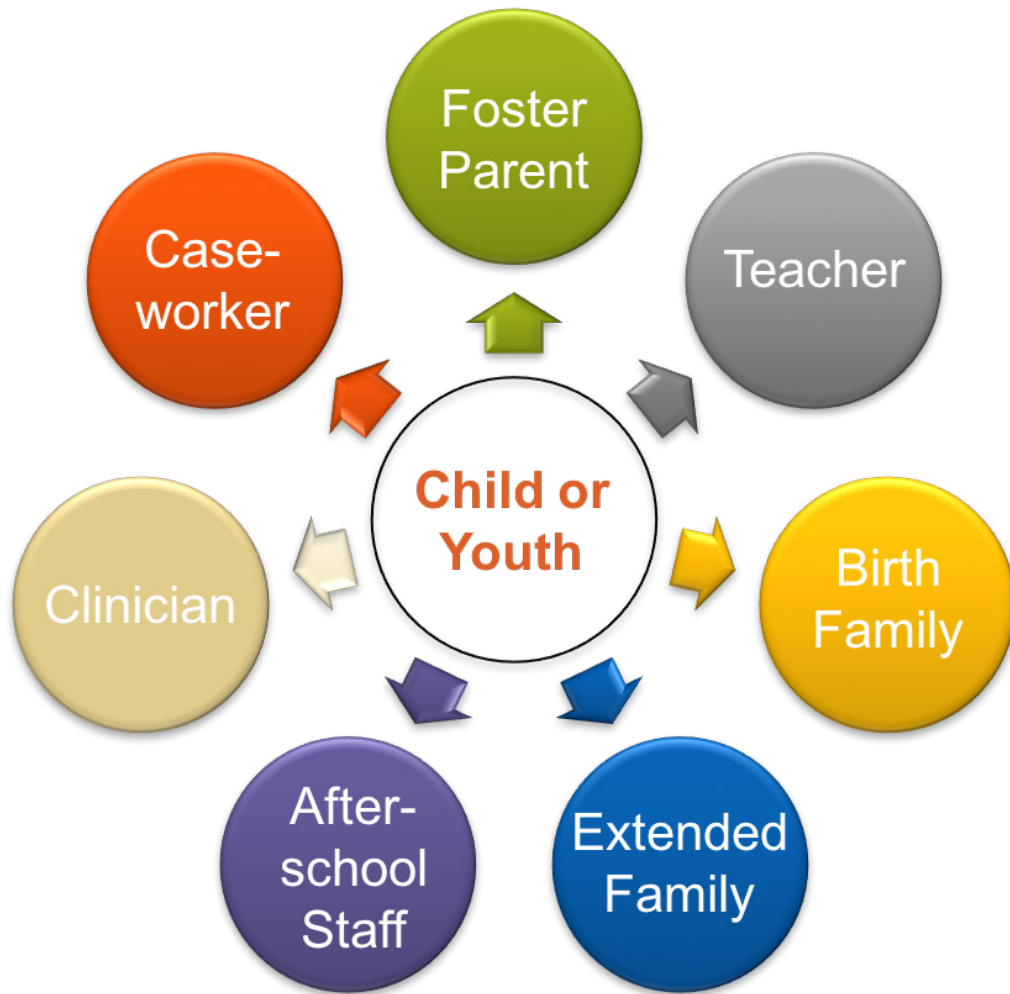
**Small changes have  
a big impact.**

**TRAUMA SYSTEMS THERAPY  
FOR FOSTER CARE**

**Are you a foster or kin caregiver?  
This training is for you.**

APPENDIX FIVE: SAMPLE POSTER ABOUT THE TST-FC TEAM

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# TST-FC

## Let's Talk About Trauma

- Trauma comes in all shapes and sizes
- Sometimes, trauma isn't obvious
- Trauma affects development
- Trauma shapes the lens through which youth see themselves and the world
- Most often, behaviors are means of survival

## TST-FC

- TST-FC is a training for foster parents
- It helps foster and kin families understand trauma and the way it can affect behavior
- It is a skill-building curriculum that teaches foster and kin parents to manage difficult behaviors
- It works to build and strengthen community partnerships

## ENDNOTES

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- 1 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Developing a trauma-informed child welfare system*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.
- 2 References to foster parents always include kinship caregivers. Caregivers refer both to foster parents and relatives.
- 3 Saxe, G. N., Ellis, B. H., & Kaplow, J. B. (2007). *Collaborative treatment of traumatized children and teens: The trauma systems therapy approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- 4 See [www.med.nyu.edu/child-adolescent-psychiatry/research/institutes-and-programs/trauma-and-resilience-research-program/trauma-systems-therapy](http://www.med.nyu.edu/child-adolescent-psychiatry/research/institutes-and-programs/trauma-and-resilience-research-program/trauma-systems-therapy)
- 5 Adapted from Public Library Association. (2007). *Turning the page: Supporting libraries, strengthening communities—Advocacy training implementation guide*. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from [www.publiclibraryadvocacy.org](http://www.publiclibraryadvocacy.org)
- 6 Wildfire, J. (2015). *Summary data report*. Durham, NC: Wildfire Associates.