

## Understanding & Addressing the Complex Mental Health Needs of Children in Adoptive and Guardianship Families.



### UNDERSTANDING FACTORS THAT SHAPE ADJUSTMENT


Understanding children's unique stories and experiences is the first and most important step in meeting their mental health needs. Successful interventions must be founded on accurate assessments.

**Module 2** focuses on the complex factors that make up the "big picture" of adoption-competent assessments, and the risk and protective factors in children, families, and their environments that help to shape adjustment in adoption and guardianship.

Consider this quote from an adoption expert:

***"The information gleaned from the assessment needs to paint a picture that leads to a comprehensive understanding of children's felt experience, their relationships, family/ placement processes, and systemic and care-related influences on children's lives."***

**Michael Tarren-Sweeney**

 Use the resource, **Risk & Protective Factors**, in **Lesson 1** to identify biological, psychological, social risk and protective factors present in the case of an adopted or foster youth with whom you have worked.

### Experiences Shape Youths' Mental Health

Remember the mantra of trauma-informed treatment: **"It's not what's wrong with you, but what has happened to you!"** Often parents and professionals alike focus on youths' behaviors, labeling clusters of symptoms with many diagnoses. With youth who have experienced many adversities in their early lives, it is essential to widen one's lens to the complex influences in a child's development and manner of coping.



Please review the **Comprehensive Assessment Outline**.

You will need to consider known, unknown and suspected factors in these categories:

- Genetic factors and prenatal experiences
- Maltreatment and other traumas
- Early attachment experiences and losses
- Adverse experiences after removal
- Capacities and challenges of adoptive parents/ guardians
- Developmental functioning & neurocognitive capacities
- Environmental factors



**See page 2**



## REFRAMING SURVIVAL BEHAVIORS

Helping parents to understand the underlying causes of youths' challenging behaviors is a first step in establishing a healing environment. Their coping behaviors and developmental profiles were shaped by their experiences. The framework below helps to understand the four areas that are impacted by early adversity.



### Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD)

**diagnosis** describes the multi-layered impact of multiple and ongoing traumatic experiences. Take a case of a youth with whom you work who has experienced complex trauma. Assess where they would fall on the 4 continuums of the framework below as well as the symptoms of DTD they exhibit.

#### CAPACITY FOR RELATIONSHIPS

Intimacy ..... Fear of closeness

#### IDENTITY

Positive sense of self...Identity confusion

#### FELT SAFETY & CONTROL

Mastery ..... Powerlessness

#### SELF-REGULATION

Self-control..... Impulsivity

## Helping Children Tell Their Stories



Try one new tool presented in lesson 3 for helping children to integrate their stories:

- Therapeutic life story work
- Timelines
- Digital stories & story boards
- Ecomaps & genograms
- Bibliotherapy & cinematherapy
- Memory boxes

## Issues in Diagnosis and Treatment

Parents need to be involved throughout treatment to develop trusting relationships with their children and a healing environment for them.

In **lesson 5**, there is a program directory of 16 practice models that are useful with foster, guardianship and adopted youth and their families. Identify which of these you are familiar with and which you would like to learn more about.



Research raises concerns related to the use of psychotropic medications in children. Review and familiarize yourself with the guidance offered in the resource, *Psychotropic Medication Use by Children in Child Welfare*.



National Adoption Competency  
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**Contact NTI for More Information:** [ntiadmin@adoptionsupport.org](mailto:ntiadmin@adoptionsupport.org)

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