

**FOCUS: Honoring Advocates During National Foster Care Month**

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May/June 2017

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Resource for America



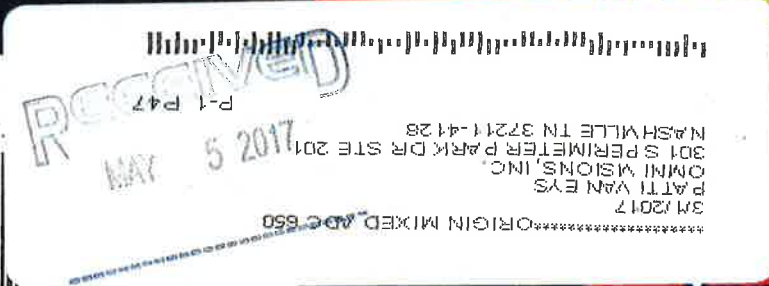
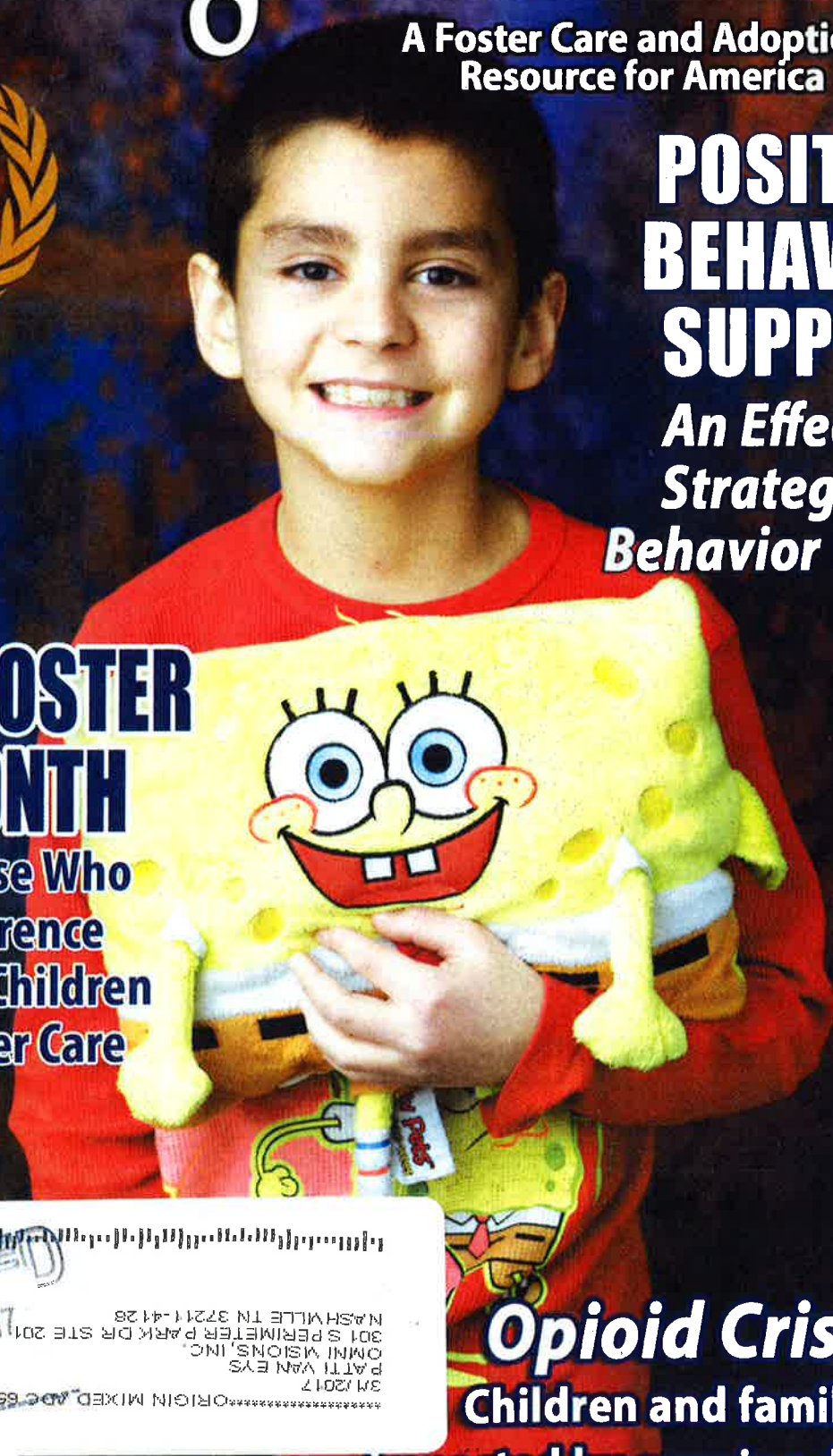
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*An Effective  
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## NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

Honoring Those Who  
Make a Difference  
in the Lives of Children  
Living in Foster Care



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# Traumagenic Factors

## *Internal Messages that Keep Kids Stuck*

**W**e've all been there. Stumped by our children's behavior.

- Melting down after a fun family event or receiving praise.
- Not turning in assignments that have been completed.
- Pushing us away when all we want to do is love.
- Hoarding food, stealing, lying, aggressing.

The list goes on. We get it: our children come from histories of maltreatment and disrupted attachment. But shouldn't solid and consistent parenting do the trick? What are we missing? Perhaps it's the deeply rooted

internal messages expertly packed in our children's "invisible suitcases," a key concept taught to foster parents through the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's curriculum, "Caring for children who have experienced trauma: A workshop for resource parents."

Negative beliefs living in the fibers of earliest experiences about self, others and the world are packed in this ever present suitcase, guiding behaviors mystifying to both adult and child. Suitcase beliefs such as "I'm worthless," "You're unreliable," "I'm powerless," "You are or will be threatening or rejecting" and "The

world's not safe" impede relationship building and developmental progress.

For example, the internal belief, "I'm not worthy" may be the culprit behind a meltdown following praise. The "unworthy" child finds herself in an unfamiliar position after praise — a position of worth — which defies the internal belief. This is uncomfortable, triggering a meltdown. The meltdown elicits a negative reaction from the caregiver, thus reinforcing the child's deeply ingrained belief: "See, I am unworthy; I'm bad." Ironically, the child is once again in her comfort zone. This way of being (i.e., "unworthy") is familiar and para-

doxically “safe.” Children, often unconsciously, draw caregivers into their maltreatment reenactments around negative internal beliefs for various reasons — in order to feel safe, to release anger or anxiety, to gain mastery over old trauma, or to feel in control as they cause this predictable sequence. Caregivers have an option: Step into the reenactment or give the child a different experience, one that repacks the suitcase.

How? Caregivers are encouraged to step back in order to observe, not enter, the reenactment. They must avoid urges to withdraw, reject or respond in anger — all normal responses to aggressive outbursts, lying or being pushed away. Instead, caregivers are called to repeatedly provide disconfirming experiences and messages to counter children’s negative beliefs. “You are worthy.” “You are safe in this family.” “We will guide you with kindness and patience after listening and understanding.” “We will not be punitive.” “We will protect you from danger.” “We will not leave you.” Repack. Repack. Repack. By avoiding being part of the expected reenactment, consequences can be given without negative caregiver emotions. Calm and dispassionate correction, balanced with high doses of nurturing will aid in the repacking of the suitcase. If caregivers show they are supportive and can tolerate these important discussions, children are free to identify and talk about their suitcase beliefs (e.g., “I don’t trust you”). Once children believe that caregivers will not abandon or hurt them, healing begins. Damaging internal messages dissipate.

Internalized messages packed in the suitcase may reflect core themes of psychological injury in the form of stigmatization, betrayal, traumatic sexualization and powerlessness, according to David Finkelhor and Angela Browne from the University of New Hampshire’s Family Violence Research Program. Although originally conceptualized for child sexual abuse, these “traumagenic factors,” with the exception of traumatic sexualization,

are a helpful framework for thinking about all types of internalized maltreatment messages.

Stigmatization refers to negative self-associations such as badness, shame and guilt that are communicated to the child around the abuse experiences. The very secrecy of abuse leaves a youngster knowing innately that “this is bad and I can’t talk about it.” Stigma absorbed by messages from the abuser is compounded by attitudes learned through family and community (e.g., sex is taboo; females who are not virgins are spoiled goods). Circumstances around abuse disclosure greatly impact the level of felt stigma. For example, if a child is not believed, is scapegoated after telling, is blamed for the abusive activity, or links negative outcomes to disclosure, he will likely experience higher stigma.

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Consider possible internal messages around stigma: It was my fault; I didn’t say no; It’s my fault my family is poor/split up/angry/in prison; I’m a snitch for telling; It felt good — I must be a pervert; I must be gay; I’m a slut; I’m damaged goods; I’m dirty; I’m bad.

*Twelve-year-old Deandre was sexually abused by his older brothers and physically abused by caregivers. Deandre carries self-blame for “breaking his family up” because, at age 7, a teacher noticed carpet burns on his body (sustained while resisting the abuse) and called*

*Child Protective Services. He stated, “I shouldn’t have jumped around so much. It’s all my fault that my family got broken up.”*

Nine-year-old Lola wrote to her foster mom:

*“Lola is stupid and a retard. . . Everybody hates me and they always will so I might as well kill myself if I will be treated like garbage. I have had enough bad things happen to me but nobody cares. . . So I shouldn’t care about myself. . . God doesn’t care about me or love me. . . that’s why I wish I was never born at all because nobody will care or love me . . . I deserve to go to hell.”*

Betrayal refers to scenarios in which children discover that someone upon whom they trust and are dependent has caused them harm, or

when a caregiver knew about, but did not stop the abuse.

Youngsters abused by family members or close friends feel more betrayed than youngsters abused by more distant others. Children whose family members react negatively to their abuse disclosure may feel more betrayed. Youngsters with betrayal as a main dynamic may be stuck on internal messages such as: I can’t trust anyone; I don’t count; Even moms can’t be trusted; I’m not worth protecting. *Twelve-year-old Donny was left for a weekend*

with a man he and his parents met at a flea market. Donny reported to his parents (who were long haul truck drivers) that the man sexually abused him, but he was not believed. Instead, his parents left him again with this man, isolated in the woods. Donny was sexually abused multiple times a day for three months before his mother discovered via the internet

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*that the man was a registered sexual offender. Donny, now in foster care, felt betrayed by both his parents. His internal messages regarding both trust and his own self-worth were holding him back from permanency.*

Traumatic sexualization refers to the distortion of a child's developing sexuality caused by sexual abuse. Children emerge from traumatic sexualization with inappropriate repertoires of sexual behavior, and misconceptions about their sexual self-concepts, sexual norms, behaviors and morals. This can occur through exchange of attention and rewards for sexual favors or through creating a fearful connection between abuse circumstances and sexual matters.

*Nick, age 14, had been sexually abused by his father for several years as a young child. He drew a picture of his body with muddy “pollution” inside that was beginning to leak out. In exploring his concerns, he shared how his father put “pollution” in him (through sexually abusive acts) and now he (Nick) was “leaking” it out. What had occurred is that Nick had begun to have “wet dreams” and Nick was convinced this was his father's pollution that was leaking from his body. What should have*

*been a natural step of puberty was perceived as scary and nasty due to long-held internal messages.*

Internal messages of traumatic sexualization might include overemphasis on sexuality on the one hand (e.g., I get what I want through sex. My best asset is my sexiness; I don't

feel “right” unless I have sex. I deserve to be used), and a rigid avoidance of sexuality on the other hand (e.g., I will never have sex; I will never date; I will cover up my body; I don't want to be noticed).

Powerlessness occurs when someone bigger and in a position of power has contravened the child's will, desires and sense of efficacy. Children may find their attempts to halt the abuse ineffective, or may feel too afraid to attempt to stop it. Children's personal body space is invaded against their will, they may be forced or coerced, or simply feel threatened by the abuser's authority; powerlessness can occur without threats but simply through the subtle coercion inherent in the disproportionate level of power and the child's dependency. When a child discloses and is not believed his sense of powerlessness increases. Common internal messages around powerlessness are: The world is not safe; I'm too weak to protect myself; I'll never be able to fend for myself; I'll always need to be with a strong, powerful, protective other to feel OK; Girls are weak; I'm a wimp.

*John, 10, and Emily, 7, were removed from a neglectful and abusive home isolated in the*

*woods after their older sibling escaped and reported maltreatment, including that John and Emily were regularly beaten on their genitalia as a punishment for bedwetting. John and Emily were indoctrinated with Bible verses and told interviewers, “Our parents don't like to spank us, but it is the law of the Bible” and “Women were put on earth to serve men and children to serve their parents.” These internal messages rendered them powerless to disclose abuse, even when given the chance (e.g., at church and in forensic interviews). They were fortunate that the older sibling was able to disclose.*

Maltreatment trauma leaves powerful internal messages in our children that they carry in their “invisible suitcases.” Caregivers have a remarkable opportunity to help repack these suitcases with healthy beliefs about self, others and the world by: 1) becoming aware of the messages and the way they are reenacted, 2) staying out of the reenactment and responding with a new experience that disconfirms the negative internal beliefs, and 3) staying calm and centered in order to respond with appropriate understanding, processing and consequences when necessary. ●

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patti van Eys, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist who has devoted her career to working with children in state custody. She is the chief clinical officer of Omni Visions, Inc., a multi-state organization dedicated to caring for foster children. A former Vanderbilt University professor and clinical director of the Vanderbilt Center of Excellence for Children in State Custody, she has authored several chapters including “Comprehensive and Therapeutic Assessment of Child Sexual Abuse: A Bridge to Treatment,” with co-author, Alanna Truss, found in Paris Goodyear-Brown's edited 2012 Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse. The case scenarios in this article derived from this chapter. You can reach van Eys at [pvaney@omnivisions.com](mailto:pvaney@omnivisions.com) with any questions.