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Fostering Forever Families: Implementing Trauma-Based Interventions in Diverse Settings

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FOSTERING FOREVER FAMILIES:
IMPLEMENTING TRAUMA-BASED INTERVENTIONS IN DIVERSE SETTINGS

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Social Work
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2017

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I dedicate this thesis to my sisters, Jennifer, Emily, and Olivia, who inspire me to work hard and change their world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my teachers all throughout my academic experience, from kindergarten to the present. Without their encouragement and the many opportunities they provided for me to succeed, I would not be where I am today.

Specifically, my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Dees, has been the most impactful; she fostered my desire to learn more and more all the time, opening the door to gain more knowledge every day.

I would also like to thank my high school AP Government teacher, Mr. Edmonson, for showing me that I should not doubt myself and for teaching me to think for and have confidence in myself.

My field instructor, Lee Fowlkes, has been such an encouragement throughout this entire CE/T project; he has challenged me all year to become a more well-rounded student, professional, and person. His support has allowed me to dig into my passion for people and learn how to use that passion to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves.

My church family back home furthered my learning experiences by financially supporting my summer mission trip to Chicago; without their support, I would not have gained first-hand knowledge about social justice and the work I want to do as a social worker.

Finally, I want to thank my friends and family for always listening to my ideas and ever-changing visions I have for the future; your patience and encouragement will always be greatly appreciated.

ABSTRACT

Within the past few decades, there has been a concern for adoptive parents to be able to attach and connect with their adoptive children. For many adoptive or foster families, behavioral issues arise that can disrupt placements. Also, a lack of attachment between adoptive parents and their adopted children can lead to a dissolution of adoption and can also traumatize the child even more than he/she might already be. Attachment and behavioral problems are not just with adoptive families either; the problems are also with foster families and children who have experienced trauma. To help correct behavioral issues and prevent dissolving adoptions or disrupting placements and increasing trauma, research has been done to demonstrate the effectiveness of trauma-informed care strategies for both adoptive and foster parents. Along with preventing dissolutions and trauma, another hope is to free adoptive parents of the stress they are put under by their peers, family members, and society to be so-called “saints” and “super-parents” because of their decision to adopt. This stress leads to adoptive parents refusing to seek help or support for any challenges they may face in their families because they feel as if they should be able to handle these issues. This stress may also lead families to seek help from sources that could harm their children instead of help them. Adoptive and foster parents need to know they are not alone; help is within reach. Through a needs assessment, a review of the literature, and interviews, it has been concluded that the need for trauma-informed post-adoption services is great; community resources need to be provided by adoption, foster care, and child welfare agencies and schools in the form of trauma-informed post-adoption services. Services would include staff trainings, family workshops, counseling services, and teacher trainings. Spreading awareness of the need for trauma-informed post-adoption services will open the door for involving other

agencies and helping children and parents on a larger scale to foster healthy family attachments and correct behavioral problems in these at-risk youths.

Steps were taken to provide services to different agencies within the Bowling Green, KY community; at Potter Children's Home and Family Ministries, we have begun providing trauma-informed post-adoption services to foster families in our agencies, and we have invited agencies, churches, and schools to be more involved in the process to spread awareness of the need for these services. Our hope is to empower diverse family groups – adoptive, foster, or biological – to establish healthy and trusting relationships with their children so those children can grow up and lead brighter futures.

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SECTION ONE – LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the need for post-adoption services and trauma-informed care is somewhat recent, and results from some studies of post-adoption service evaluations conclude that they are effective. Adoption agencies and child welfare agencies need to provide trauma-informed postadoption services to address the potential problems that arise from both domestic and international adoptions, foster care placements, and trauma. Until then, there are still several ways for families to receive help with their new way of life – family therapy sessions, parent training sessions, attachment training, and support groups are available for adoptive families.

At the start of my research, a needs assessment for post-adoption services in adoption and foster care agencies was conducted by speaking with local child care professionals and conducting a literature review on the importance of trauma-informed care trainings and support for adoptive and foster parents. The first interview conducted was with the head of Adoption Resource Program at the Family Enrichment Center in Bowling Green, KY, Denise Lambrianou. In my interview with Ms. Lambrianou, we discussed how there are many kids in foster care being over-diagnosed with different emotional or mental disorders when, according to Ms. Lambrianou, the problems may be caused by trauma instead; pre- and post-adoption services need to include trauma-informed care trainings for adoptive and foster families. An important statistic to note is that there are over 600 kids in foster care throughout 10 counties in Kentucky and only 165 families are available to support them (Lambrianou, 2016). A big difference between adoptive and foster families is how adoptive families can adopt as many children as they want; foster families are able to take in multiple children as well. However, foster

families are only able to have six children in their homes, and that is including the children they may already have.

The next interview conducted was with the Foster Care Coordinator at the Bowling Green, KY Department for Community-Based Services (DCBS), Amy Smith. Ms. Smith informed me that the DCBS post-adoption services provided by the state – if a child is adopted from foster care – include subsidies, health coverage, tuition assistance at any state university, 90 days of in-patient treatment where parents can participate in team meetings (Smith, 2016). Amy Smith also discussed the importance of placing a child with a family that suits the *child*, not vice versa. She then pointed out some differences between public adoption agencies and private adoption agencies in terms of the services they provide. While DCBS provides medical, educational, and therapeutic support, in Bowling Green, to be more specific, the one private adoption agency that is available is NECCO; the services they provide are ongoing in-home behavioral health therapy sessions with the child and family members (Smith, 2016).

Purvis, Cross and Sunshine (2007) discuss different situations that may occur, either when a family adopts or is raising a child who has experienced trauma (also known as “special needs” children), and how to address those challenges through a new intervention strategy called *Trust-Based Relational Intervention* (TBRI). Building trust with a child and helping a child feel safe has been proven to positively impact how they respond in different situations; after establishing a solid and trusting relationship with the child, behavioral and emotional issues are better addressed. The importance of having a relationship with the child is emphasized; seeing the child for the potential that he/she possesses by viewing behavioral issues through the lenses of trauma, past, and challenges

is also emphasized. Self-awareness through knowledge of how one was raised by his/her own parents makes it easier to move forward in the best way possible in taking care of one's child.

Foli and Thompson (2004) compare expectations of adopting to the realities of adopting. The authors also emphasize how no one talks about the issues of adoption because society has forced them into the role of a "saint" for being such "awesome" people and the role of "super-parents" for doing the most by going out of their way and taking someone in who is not a part of the biological family.

Gray (2002) takes a child's emotional and mental needs and stages of life and matches them with parenting strategies that can enhance a child's happiness and emotional and mental health. Topics that were covered include trauma, grief, attachment disorder, cultural change, fetal alcohol syndrome, and support for families.

Puzzo, Smaragdi, Gonzalez, Martin-Key, and Fairchild (2016) analyze and discuss the development of disruptive behavior disorders (DBDs) and possible ways to treat the behaviors. They focus on some of the factors related to the development of DBDs. One factor is parental separation during childhood; parental separation is related to a higher risk of developing DBDs during adolescence. Another factor that may contribute to the development of a disruptive behavior disorder is a lack of parental warmth and attachment between the child and parent. The authors conclude that "positive relationship, healthy attachments, effective communication, and discipline" may help to prevent the development of DBDs (Puzzo, et al., 2016).

Dhami, Mandel, and Sothmann (2007) discuss a study that was done to evaluate the effectiveness of post-adoption services. According to the authors and contributors of

the study, the use of post-adoption services can amplify positive connections between adoptive parents and their children.

The importance of the effectiveness of post-adoption services ought to be emphasized even more due to the danger of children displaced through private re-homing (Steinberg, 2016). Re-homing is the placement of a child into a new home after an adoption has been finalized. It is not regulated by law or by adoption professionals, so the risks for traumatizing the child are heightened along with the likelihood of abuse or neglect.

What happens to cause re-homing? When placements are threatened, parents may turn to the internet in order to find ways to cope with their new lifestyles. In their searches, they may encounter other adoptive parents who have gone through adoption challenges as well. However, these searches may also lead adoptive parents to discussion forums for them to vent, and they may also find ways to advertise their adoptive children online in order to find “parental surrogates” for them. If a child is placed into this new re-homing environment, they are unsure of whether or not it is permanent, and the potential lack of knowledge the new parents have in trauma-informed care prevents them from being able to parent the child in the healthiest way. Also, the potential lack of knowledge the adoptive parents have of the re-homing parents may pose a risk for the child because the re-home parents may not have undergone any background checks or adoptive parent trainings or counseling.

In summary, re-homing can be traumatic for the adoptive child. According to Steinberg (2016), ways to prevent and restrict re-homing may be found through enforcing governmental laws and regulations. Preventative measures may also be emphasized

during both the pre- and post-adoption periods. In the pre-adoption period, counseling, trainings, and full disclosure of child backgrounds and potential challenges would aid in preparing adoptive families. In the post-adoption period, counseling, support groups, and additional trainings afterwards will help parents connect and adjust with their children.

As the conduction of the needs assessment continued, the question was raised as to how to help prevent post-adoption challenges through pre-adoption services. It is important for parents to be aware of how early negative experiences are associated with behavior difficulties, suggesting that the place of origin of adoption could be irrelevant when it comes to the effects of trauma and the needs of families (Groza & Ryan, 2002).

As the need for post-adoption and trauma-informed care services became evident in the needs assessment, a challenge presented itself in the form of a blog published on a networking website. The blog post was written by a woman named Liz Latty on November 17th, 2016. She wrote about her personal story of being adopted as an infant; her post was honest, almost brutal, as she disclosed her thoughts and feelings on being adopted. She felt conflicted as her parents told and re-told the story of how they adopted her and how she has a special day every year: the day they brought her home at last. However, for Liz, growing up knowing she was adopted left her feeling torn between a desire to know her biological family and a desire to be accepted by her adoptive family. She felt as if she could not convey her feelings to her adoptive parents because she did not want to run the risk of hurting their feelings, driving them away, or allowing them to think they made a mistake in adopting her and should give her back. Liz feels there is a fairy tale myth of the adopted child living happily ever after, and she finds it unfortunate that people continue to “buy into it.” Her goal in writing this blog post was to argue that

adopted children may not always feel like they have gotten their happily ever after; adopted children may experience contradictory feelings of desiring to belong in the present and desiring to know about their past, and it can be a lonely, long experience for them (Latty, 2016).

Latty's blog is also expressive in how she discusses her emotions throughout the blog post. She talks about how she kept silent for years, and she finally confessed her feelings to her adoptive parents when she was an adult; she is making progress and is able to now connect with her family in a more honest way (Latty, 2016).

Latty's hope is for people and families who wish to adopt to remember that not all children feel as if being adopted is their "happily-ever-after," that conflicting emotions may arise, and parents need to be aware of these conflicts (Latty, 2016). She also encourages the reader to seek out other options before choosing to adopt; her reasoning behind this suggestion is that adoption can have a negative impact on the biological family, the child being adopted, and the adoptive family. Latty desires for continued work and effort to be put into making sure biological families do not have to resort to terminating parental rights due to financial setbacks and barriers; financial welfare programs should be better-funded instead (Latty, 2016).

SECTION TWO – DISCUSSION

Though counseling services provided by NECCO, an adoption agency in Bowling Green, KY, are important for adoptive families, parental trainings and trauma-informed care services are also necessary in order to address the root of the problem – kids who are adopted, either through domestic or international means, or from foster care that have either been exposed to some sort of abuse or neglect or have been traumatized in some way. Through *Trust-Based Relational Intervention* (TBRI) strategies, adoptive and foster parents are given the opportunity to learn how to help children cope with their fear-responses and ditch the label of “bad kids,” knowing their behavioral problems are due to acting out of fear, not blatant disregard for authority; with parents being informed and empowered to connect with their children, therapy, as important as it is, may not be as necessary for the long-term.

Foli and Thompson (2004) in *Post-Adoption Blues* open the door to breaking the silence of adoptive parents. They discuss how a big reason why post-adoption services are important and necessary is to provide adoptive parents with the support and resources they need in order to cope with the lifestyle changes that take place because of adopting. Knowing how to cope and what resources are available will allow adoptive parents to be acknowledged first as parents *then* adoptive parents. Parents of children who have experienced trauma also need to know how to cope with those lifestyle changes, whether the changes are due to loss, abuse, or neglect.

Purvis, Cross, and Sunshine (2007) provide readers with parental knowledge and Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) strategies for caring for their adopted or special needs children. With the help of TBRI, parents are empowered to take matters

into their own hands and handle all sorts of behavioral and emotional issues that arise with their children. Parents are given hope; knowing that there is a way to learn how to better connect with their children, parents won't have to seek help from Internet search engines and biased discussion forums designed to encourage parents to vent about their problems rather than seek a safe solution that does not include seeking re-homing.

After reading the blog post by Liz Latty, one can infer that adopting – and even fostering – children can have unintended negative effects on all parties involved. An important observation to be noted is how it seems like Latty's goal in writing this blog post is to inform readers of another side of adoption and also to persuade readers not to seek adoption as a first option. That said, this particular blog post appears to eradicate the need for post-adoption or trauma-informed care services; if people are not adopting children – and if biological parents are getting the help they need when it comes to finances – then there might be no traumatizing experiences through which children and families would need to work. However, the fact that adoption and foster care *are* options for families means that there *is* a need for trauma-informed care and Trust-Based Relational Intervention strategies to help those families cope with the grief of loss and feelings of confusion, abandonment, anger, or fear – all of which can lead to emotional and behavioral issues among children who have experienced trauma of any kind.

What can be inferred from the discussion and the connections made between the sources is that with the information gathered and analyzed, the importance of post-adoption services, trauma-informed care strategies, and TBRI strategies is significant. With these services, we can protect our children from further trauma or people who pose a threat to their safety.

The next steps to be taken involve coming up with a curriculum that could be implemented in adoption agencies, schools, and child welfare agencies. The curriculum could include hosting informational workshops, trainings for agency employees, teachers, and parents. Along with trainings for families, schools, and agency employees, counseling services that are tailored to be trauma-informed specific can also be provided to families after adopting, a foster care placement, or at the time of a traumatic experience. The hope for providing these services to families is to help build stronger relationships among family members, foster warm and loving attachments among them, create brighter, more hopeful futures for the children, and prevent emotional, social, or behavioral problems from having long-term effects on children and families.

Making communities aware of the services that can be provided will empower the people of those communities to take advantage of the opportunity to build stronger relationships within their families, whether they're adoptive, foster, or biological. From a macro standpoint, helping families will in turn help communities as children are able to grow up in families that love them and support them. With an encouraging and supportive family, children have the opportunity to feel more secure individually and in their families. They can gain the confidence as adults to reach their goals and contribute to society. In the future, when the children of this generation have children of their own, they may be able to remember how they were raised and do the same with raising their children, continuing the cycle of raising kids from a trust-based relational perspective.

SECTION THREE – CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Without taking advantage of postadoption services, trauma-informed care, and TBRI strategies, families run the risk of providing subpar care to their children. Parents, whether biological, foster, or adoptive, may not have come to terms with the way they were raised in the past. For parents to better attach with their children, it is important for parents to understand how their own parents raised them and move forward from there. Barring this, then the children may have difficulty attaching and connecting with their families, and the trauma they've already faced from their previous home situation, prenatal situation, or other traumatic experience will be magnified and cause those children to face developmental and emotional hardships in the future. Continued research would be beneficial to assure extended services to families providing an opportunity for a successful family experience. Until then, taking advantage of the aforementioned ways to currently help families will allow families to address the issues of trauma, loneliness, hopelessness, and fear. Spreading awareness of ways agencies can help through TBRI strategies and/or trauma-informed care will reassure families that they are *not* alone and help is available.

At Potter Children's Home and Family Ministries, we are working to provide trauma-informed care for our clients. Trainings to become trauma-informed began last year. The trainings occurred weekly from August to November, and they covered how to build strong attachments with children from hard places and the three principles of TBRI strategies: Connecting, Empowering, and Correcting.

Two additional trainings were held in March that focused on the implementation of TBRI/trauma-informed care for our clients, and Potter Children's Home hosted the

Empowered to Connect Conference the weekend of April 7th and 8th. The conference was free for everyone in the community who wished to learn more about building lasting relationships with children from hard places.

Lee Fowlkes, Field Instructor, has been hosting group trainings at the Child Advocacy Center, as well as to other agencies and churches in the community.

As part of this work of reaching out to communities, our trainings with other agencies will be evaluated. With a goal of increasing family knowledge and confidence in minimizing trauma, we hope to continue to add service agencies willing to participate in our trainings.

Success has been noted in residents of Potter Children's Home after implementing TBRI. Along with training the agency staff, letters to 15 agencies and churches within the Bowling Green, KY community were sent out to invite them to join in becoming trauma-informed. So far, as a result, trainings have been scheduled with two agencies: Community Education to begin in May and again in September and the Child Advocacy Center is currently holding ongoing trainings.

As graduation nears, I will be unable to see the complete unfolding of my project. However, I am appreciative of having been given the opportunity to work with my field instructor in getting this project off the ground. Expectations are to continue to work within the Bowling Green community in the future and possibly see the changes within the community as a result of the work Lee and I did.

My goal going into this project was to provide trauma-informed services for clients at Potter Children's Home. As the project unfolded, my goal changed to include

other agencies and churches in the community so that change could have a broader and more lasting impact on families with children from hard places.

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APPENDIX A

Letter to Community Agencies

To Whom It May Concern:

Potter Children's Home and Family Ministries recognizes the great needs of children and families in crisis situations, and we are thankful that we are not alone in providing those services to meet those needs. Other agencies and organizations, like yours, work diligently to help those kids and families who need it most. We have recently begun implementation of an intervention strategy called Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), and we would welcome an opportunity to introduce it to you.

TBRI is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that is designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. TBRI uses Empowering Principles to address physical needs, Connecting Principles for attachment needs, and Correcting Principles to disarm fear-based behaviors. The focus of TBRI is meeting relationship needs and facilitating attachment in order to repair brain function that was affected by trauma. While the intervention is based on years of attachment, sensory processing, and neuroscience research, the heartbeat of TBRI is connection.

Witnessing the effectiveness of TBRI for the families in our organization and understanding the need to help children and families within the community, we would like to share this strategy in order to be a help and a support to you as you invest in the lives of your own clients. We can offer free workshops and trainings for your staff and community support groups for parents, especially parents of adopted/foster children.

It is our desire to share this intervention with agencies and organizations throughout the community to help as many families as we possibly can. We would like to

discuss how we can partner with you and work together to empower families in crisis situations. If you are interested in learning more about TBRI, please feel free to contact me at 270-843-3038 or at lee@potterministries.org.

Because of Him,

Lee Fowlkes

Minister of Family Services

APPENDIX B

Letter to Supporting Churches

To Whom It May Concern:

We want to thank you for your support of Potter Children's Home and Family Ministries in the past. It is because of your generosity that we can serve children and families in our on-campus foster care and single parent programs. As we continue to serve our residents, we recognize that we have a responsibility and an opportunity to serve children and families within the community.

At Potter, we have recently begun implementing an intervention strategy called Trust-Based Relational Intervention. TBRI is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that is designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. TBRI uses Empowering Principles to address physical needs, Connecting Principles for attachment needs, and Correcting Principles to disarm fear-based behaviors. The focus of TBRI is meeting relationship needs and facilitating attachment in order to repair brain function that was affected by trauma. While the intervention is based on years of attachment, sensory processing, and neuroscience research, the heartbeat of TBRI is connection.

The focus of TBRI is helping "kids from hard places" to feel safe, build trusting relationships with caregiving adults, and learn how to form secure attachments with the people around them. TBRI has been shown to be effective in many settings, including residential facilities, foster homes, schools, churches and homes.

We have witnessed the effectiveness of TBRI for the families in our organization, and we hope to inform others in the community. We believe the strategies of TBRI can

support parents of children who have difficult behavior, help Bible class teachers deal with discipline problems, and assist ministers as they interact with teens and adults with traumatic backgrounds.

We would welcome an opportunity to visit you to share more details about TBRI and how we can best support you. We can offer free workshops for teachers, trainings for youth leaders, or community support groups for parents, especially parents of adopted/foster children. If you are interested, please feel free to contact me at 270-843-3038 or at lee@potterministries.org

Because of Him,

Lee Fowlkes

Minister of Family Services