

Parenting Skills Training

Session One

The Teaching-Learning Journey

Introduction

Session One of the *Parenting Skills Training* is the second of nine sessions designed to help prepare you for your work as a Therapeutic Caregiver. This session is about the close connection between teaching and learning in a caregiver's journey. It begins with questions about who has taught you and how you have learned from your own life experiences. You will be challenged to view yourself as both learner and teacher, rather than teacher alone. You will hear from experienced caregivers about what they have learned in their own teaching-learning journeys.

Session One establishes fundamental principles that shape our work with children in this program. It lays out the content and sequence of the *Parenting Skills Training* as a whole and will help you anticipate what to expect in subsequent sessions.

Session One establishes a framework for the PST. It introduces several topics explored more deeply in subsequent sessions within the organizing theme of teaching and learning. In Session One we begin to look at learning from the perspective of brain functioning. We will consider how people learn from experience and how that experience actually shapes the way our brains are structured and how they develop. We will consider how the same behavior that helps us cope with a bad situation may become 'bad' behavior in other situations, even to the point of undermining our ability to cope successfully. We will consider how primary relationships affect learning through 'modeling' and the role empathy plays in creating and sustaining relationships. We will begin to work on empathy as a skill by practicing the first step of recognizing and managing our own feelings. We will make important distinctions between empathy and sympathy and between *reactivity* and *responsiveness* in the process.

Session One offers an opportunity for you to examine your own expectations about the child who may come into your home. It takes you on '*One Child's Journey*' to offer a perspective on a child's life experiences from the child's point of view. Session One leads into a homework assignment in which you think about one important relationship in your life and what makes it special.

PST Core Principles

Most any endeavor is based on some basic principles that shape our goals and what we do to reach them. In this program, we are guided by the fundamental goal of helping children find permanent families – either by returning to their original families, joining the families of relatives or through adoption.

The PST is based on several other core principles which shape the training process and how we approach our work with children generally.

PRINCIPLE #1: *Relationship is the foundation for healing, recovery and growth.*

Children come to our program having experienced numerous traumas and broken relationships. They will not heal by themselves. Their ability to recover and grow is directly tied to the depth and quality of the relationships they have with significant people in their lives. Caregivers are among the most significant. It is crucial that you understand the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships with the children coming into your home. It is equally important that you understand that children's relationships with their parents and siblings are profound – no matter what the children may have been through. The fact that the child placed in your home is not your biological child means that it will take extra effort to see the strengths the child brings and to work on their challenges in a productive way. Your own challenge will be to establish a safe, positive and caring relationship with the child AND to respect and help promote safe, positive and caring relationships with their primary family to the greatest extent possible.

PRINCIPLE #2: *Behavior is learned... and can be taught.*

The children we serve may have learned patterns of behavior that are seriously challenging. Most behavior is learned – including behavior that is irritating and upsetting. But behavior is learned for a reason. We all do the things that *work* for us – especially when it comes to coping with stressful situations, defending ourselves or surviving a crisis. Expect that a child in your home will do things that upset you not so much because they want to upset you, but more because their behavior has helped them manage their own struggles up to now. Keep in mind that they have *learned* such behavior because it once helped them cope, defend themselves or survive.

Most will still be coping with the effects of separation from their own families as well as experiences they may have had in them. They may be stuck emotionally and in behaviors that hurt your feelings or make you angry. But also keep in mind that learning continues. Children keep on learning new behavior. One of your most

basic tasks is to teach. If you can establish a safe, caring relationship with the child, you will help teach him or her some of life's most important lessons.

PRINCIPLE #3: *Caregivers are teachers...who learn **from** children, not just **about** them.*

What are the qualities of an effective teacher? Effective teachers start with where the learner is, not with where they 'ought to be'. They are patient. They recognize a learner's strengths as well as needs. They use what the student brings to the experience as the basis for their teaching.

Our children may have particular problems in any or all of three major areas: physical, cognitive, emotional. They may need extra time, help and perseverance to overcome obstacles to learning. Effective teachers inspire, motivate and help the learner believe in their own abilities and deal with frustration without giving up. An effective teacher understands learning. In fact, the best teachers are as good at learning as they are at teaching because the two go hand in hand. As a therapeutic caregiver, you will have responsibility to help teach children new behavior. You will even help children develop new ways of seeing the world, themselves, their family, and others. If you are open to learning as well as teaching you will discover new things about yourself from the children who come into your home.

PRINCIPLE #4: *This journey is both yours and the child's.*

Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Most of us come into this work hoping simply to help a child. We may not realize that we will be changed by the process too. There will be opportunities to grow personally and to learn as well as to help and to teach. You can expect to experience 'growing pains' – some of them may be very difficult for you and/or your family. This is not easy work. As you approach it, understand that you are embarking on a journey of change every bit as much as the child is.

Learning and the Shape of a Child's World

Our experiences shape what and how we learn. We learn to see and respond to the world in ways that help us survive. That learning is coded like software into our brains since 'neurons that fire together, wire together'. Our view of the world, then – what to expect from it, what to hope for and what to fear – is based on our individual experiences. Our view of the world functions as a kind of mental model or blueprint. It helps us be ready to avoid threats and take advantage of opportunities.

When a child's experiences include serious and/or repeated exposure to trauma, the child's view of the world – their mental model - reflects those experiences. Children can develop a set of 'operating principles' that may have helped them survive certain threats, but which compromise their ability to recognize opportunities. In fact, they may have learned to see threats where none exist at all. They may have learned, for example, that caregivers cannot be trusted, or that you always have to take what you can when you can in order to survive, or never to tell the truth no matter what.



The good news is that our 'software programming' can be changed through new experiences and new learning. But the process takes time and requires that the new experiences provide a solid basis for different ways of seeing the world. Our main challenge as caregivers is to establish a safe, predictable and trustworthy relationship with the child – one that contradicts their negative mental model and begins to re-shape their view of the world. To do that, we need to try to understand what the child's mental model may be – to see what the shape of the world looks like through their eyes. The key to such understanding is empathy.