

## The Invisible Suitcase

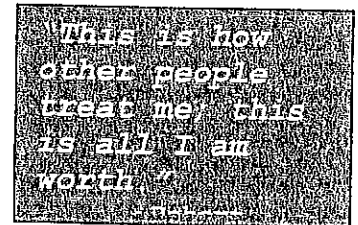
When your foster child came to your home he likely arrived with a bag full of his things...his clothes, maybe some toys and other personal items. He also brought with him another bag, one that the child isn't even aware that he has. Most foster parents aren't aware of this invisible suitcase either...but they need to be.

This invisible suitcase contains the beliefs the child has about himself, about those who take care of him, and about the world. When a child has experienced trauma—particularly maltreatment trauma that results in foster care—the invisible suitcase gets filled with specific negative beliefs. Beliefs like:

1. I am worthless.
2. I am unsafe.
3. I am powerless.

It also contains beliefs and expectations about you as the caregiver:

1. You are unresponsive.
2. You are unreliable.
3. You are or will be threatening, dangerous, rejecting.



The invisible suitcase wasn't created by you and the beliefs inside aren't personally about you. The child doesn't just store the suitcase at your house...he or she takes it to school, and into the community - everywhere they go. But now that this child is in your home, your job is to understand what this suitcase holds.

### The Invisible Suitcase and Behavior Problems

Children exposed to maltreatment trauma may develop a wide range of behavior problems. These problems may include aggression, outbursts of anger, trouble sleeping, and concentration problems. Very often, however, the behavior problems that are the most difficult to handle, and may even threaten the child's placement in your home, come from the invisible suitcase and its impact on relationships. The invisible suitcase is about not trusting in, not believing in, and not giving relationships a chance.

When children placed in foster care bring their invisible suitcase with them, the behavioral struggles between them and caregivers can increase over time. One way of understanding why this happens is the concept of **reenactment**.

Anyone will feel unlovable if the person he is most attached to is rejecting.

Reenactment is the habit of recreating old relationships with new people. Reenactments are behaviors that evoke in caregivers some of the very interactions that the child had with other adults. These behaviors can be very challenging and sometimes overwhelming for foster parents. Since the child's sense of themselves and

others is often negative and hopeless, their reenactment behaviors cause the new adults in their lives to also feel negative and hopeless toward the child.

Children engage in reenactments for a number of reasons: the interactions are familiar and have helped them survive in other relationships; reenactments test the beliefs inside the invisible suitcase for "proof" that they're right; reenactments may help to vent frustration, anger, and anxiety; and, lastly, reenactments may give the child a sense of mastery over the old traumas.

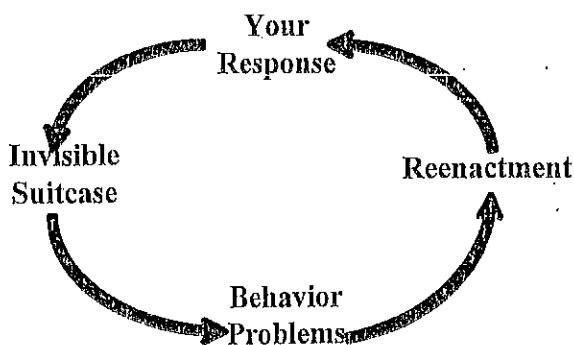
All children learn to get their needs met in relationships. They learn ways of communicating their needs to their caregivers. Traumatized kids with an invisible suitcase often learn to get their needs for attention, closeness, or even distance met in ways that are brilliant, creative, and help them to survive. The trouble is these same strategies now cause problems in new environments and with new people.

### What Foster Parents Can Do

#### *Keep the suitcase in mind.*

Foster parents must understand that children placed in their homes carry an invisible suitcase with them. Foster parents must also understand that behavioral strategies developed in a maltreating environment will get re-played in your home. These negative interactions may evoke intense emotions, and you may feel pushed in ways you never expected. Some common reactions in foster parents are:

- urges to reject the child
- abusive impulses towards the child
- emotional withdrawal and depression
- feelings of incompetence/helplessness
- feeling like a bad parent



This can lead to a vicious cycle, where the child's strategies require more of your involvement, but the relationship becomes increasingly strained through frustration and anger that now both *you* and the child feel. This negative cycle leads to future negative interactions, damaged relationships, and in some cases, placements are ended. Whether the placement ends or not, the negative cycle confirms the child's negative beliefs. The suitcase gets heavier.

### *Give disconfirming experiences.*

Since the negative cycle confirms the invisible suitcase, you must recognize the cycle and get out of the cycle as soon as possible. *Your response* in this cycle provides the opportunity to give a disconfirming experience—an experience that challenges the invisible suitcase and teaches the child:

- You are worthwhile/wanted.
- You are safe.
- You are capable.

And that as your caregiver:

- I am available and I won't reject you.
- I am responsive and I won't abuse you.
- I will listen and understand.

Recognizing the negative cycle, getting out of it, and providing disconfirming experiences does not mean giving kids a free pass on their behaviors. You must still hold children accountable, give consequences, and set expectations. But with the invisible suitcase in mind, you deliver consequences without the passion and emotions that often come with reenactments. Instead, you give dispassionate, matter of fact consequences, monitor your own emotions and reactions, and use your own affect wisely.

### *Talk about it.*

The strategies that maltreated children develop to get their needs met may be brilliant and creative, but too often are personally costly. They need to learn that there is a better way.

Children need to learn that they can talk about the underlying feelings and beliefs contained in their invisible suitcase. They need to understand that you as the caregiver can tolerate these expressions without the common reactions from adults that they have experienced and come to expect: urges to reject, abuse, abandon, or shut down the child.

Help children learn words to describe their emotions and feelings and encourage them to express those feelings. When the contents of the invisible suitcase go unspoken, reenactments and negative cycles are more likely to occur. Because of their negative beliefs, children with an invisible suitcase have learned to get adult involvement through acting out and behavior problems. Be sure to provide positive encounters and many disconfirming experiences. And remember, all of this takes time.

### *Take good care.*

Trauma takes a toll on children, families, schools, and communities. Trauma can also take a toll on you. Anyone caring for traumatized children and adolescents is vulnerable to the effects of trauma. Without care and attention you can feel physically, mentally, or emotionally worn out—as if you are carrying the child's traumas “too much alone,” a condition known as *compassion fatigue* (Figley, 1995).

Successful foster parents who care for children with trauma know that they cannot go it alone. When you care for children who have stories of trauma, you need to guard against isolation. Work in a team, talk to other foster parents and therapists, and ask for support. All too often foster parents judge themselves as weak or incompetent for having strong reactions to a child's trauma. These feelings are not a sign of weakness or incompetence; rather, they can be the cost of caring.

Be aware of the signs of compassion fatigue. These include things like:

- increased irritability or impatience with the child
- denying that traumatic events impact the child, or feeling numb or detached
- intense feelings and intrusive thoughts about the child's trauma that don't lessen over time
- dreams about the child's traumas
- urges to shut down or detach from the child

If you experience any of these signs for more than two to three weeks, seek counseling with a professional who is knowledgeable about trauma. Any adult helping children with trauma, who also has his or her own unresolved traumatic experiences, is more at risk for compassion fatigue. Seek help with your own traumas to make sure they don't get in the way.

And finally, take good care of yourself. Guard against the job of foster parenting becoming the only activity that defines who you are. Keep perspective by spending time with children and adolescents who have not been maltreated, find joy in every day, and be sure to laugh often.

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