

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: The Heart of Post-Permanency Success

When children experience trauma, loss, or multiple moves in care, the consequences ripple through every aspect of their development. Their ability to trust, regulate emotions, and form secure relationships is often compromised.

In these situations, the parent-child relationship is not simply a connection; it is a lifeline, a source of stability and healing. Post-permanency programs, which support families after adoption, guardianship, or other permanent placements, play a critical role in strengthening these relationships. When these programs prioritize attachment and emotional connection, families can thrive, even after significant adversity.



The Parent-Child Relationship Is the Cornerstone of Healing

Children affected by trauma sometimes behave in ways that seem resistant, confusing, or hard to manage. Yet beneath these behaviors lies a profound need for safety and connection. Many attachment-focused models, such as TBRI® (Trust Based Relational Intervention®), emphasize that while behavior management is often the focus of interventions, the deeper and more transformative goal is the relationship between child and parent. This distinction is essential: behavior is a symptom; attachment is the cure.

Consider a young child who has moved between foster homes multiple times. When placed with a new adoptive parent or guardian, the child may resist closeness, push boundaries, or withdraw entirely. Without a supportive program guiding the parent on how to respond with patience and empathy, these behaviors can escalate, creating stress for the entire family. But



when a post-permanency program equips parents to understand these behaviors as messages of fear or grief rather than defiance; a different story unfolds. Through consistent care, emotional attunement, and movement toward secure attachment, the child begins to trust that their parents can be reliable and nurturing. Over time, these relationships can reshape the child's developmental trajectory.

Evidence for the Power of Relationships

Research shows ongoing parent commitment and post-permanency supports serve as protective factors against placement disruptions, even when children display challenging behaviors. Similarly, White et al. (2021) showed that interventions targeting parent or parent strain, enhancing child -parent or -parent nurturing, and improving attachment can bolster parental commitment, promoting family stability and well-being. Secure and supportive parent-child bonds act as a buffer against the risks associated with past trauma and loss, promoting resilience and overall family well-being.

For children who have experienced multiple placements or disrupted attachments, the stakes are even higher. These children often carry implicit fears that new parents will disappoint or abandon them. Minor conflicts or boundary-setting moments can trigger intense emotional responses, potentially straining relationships. Post-permanency programs which equip parents to interpret and respond thoughtfully in these moments can prevent small ruptures from escalating, reinforcing the child's sense of felt-safety, trust, and belonging.

Case Example: Marcus

Marcus, age 16, had spent most of his adolescence in group care before moving in with a kinship caregiver, his aunt. He was quiet, guarded, and quick to shut down during conflict. His aunt enrolled in a post-permanency program that emphasized attachment and emotional regulation. Through training based on models like TBRI®, she learned to respond with calm curiosity instead of correction.

One evening, after Marcus skipped school, instead of confronting him with anger, she asked, “What was today like for you?” That simple shift opened a door. Marcus shared that he felt overwhelmed and disconnected. Over time, these moments built trust. He began attending school more regularly and engaging in family routines.

For Marcus, healing began not with discipline, but with connection.

Practical Strategies for Post-Permanency Programs

Effective post-permanency programs approach family support not as a set of interventions to fix a child's behavior, but as a series of strategies to strengthen relationships. Three strategies which may be particularly impactful include:

1. Attachment-Centered Support

Secure attachment is foundational to a child's emotional and social development. Programs that focus on attachment help parents view behaviors through a trauma-informed lens and provide the perspective of behavior as communication of need rather than deliberate misbehavior. For example, a teenager who distances themselves may not be rejecting their parent personally but testing boundaries out of fear of future loss. Reframing these behaviors allows parents to respond with empathy, curiosity, and consistency, key ingredients for healing.

2. Relationship-Based Services

Post-permanency programs should focus on the entire family, rather than a specific child. Counseling, educational workshops, and support groups that include parents, children, and siblings create an environment where all members feel seen and heard. When families work together to address challenges, it promotes collaboration over conflict and reinforces the family as a unified system.

3. Emotional Co-Regulation and Behavioral Insight

Children's behaviors often signal unmet needs or emotional triggers tied to past trauma. Programs that teach parents to identify these triggers, respond calmly, and co-regulate emotions provide children with models of healthy emotional expression. Moreover, when parents learn to regulate their own emotional responses, the cycle of reactive conflict diminishes. Becoming a "behavior detective" fosters understanding and connection rather than frustration and punishment.

Resources and Evidence-Based Interventions

Research underscores the critical importance of embedding attachment-focused supports into post-permanency services. Programs that offer ongoing guidance, coaching, and education help parents respond with empathy and understanding, fostering environments where children feel safe, valued, and supported.

The *National Center for Enhanced Post-Adoption Support* maintains a comprehensive resource library of evidence-informed models which address trauma, grief, attachment, and family resilience. These models vary in format and focus but share a common goal: strengthening relationships and promoting permanency.

[TBRI®](#) is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. There are numerous articles about this intervention on the Post-Adoption Center website. It is also an intervention that is discussed with site's receiving on-site technical assistance. The Post-Adoption Center website also has

information and direct links to two trainings that focus on the child/parent relationship:

- [National Training and Development Curriculum \(NTDC\)](#) offers a comprehensive, no-cost curriculum that addresses separation, loss, grief, and trauma in adoption and foster care.
- [CORE Teen Curriculum](#) focuses on building the unique skills that foster, and kinship parents need to effectively care for older youth. Evaluations show improved parent confidence and adolescent behavior management.

Integrating these types of programs/trainings into post-permanency services equips parents and parents with the tools and knowledge necessary to create nurturing environments, thereby promoting stability and well-being for children who have experienced trauma and loss.

Conclusion

The parent-child relationship is the cornerstone of post-permanency success. Programs that prioritize attachment, emotional understanding, and relational support provide families with the tools to navigate the challenges of trauma and loss. By shifting the focus from behavior management to relationship-building, post-permanency programs create an environment in which children can heal, thrive, and develop secure attachments.

When parents are supported to connect deeply with their children, stability increases, behaviors improve, and the entire family benefits. Post-permanency programs that place the parent-child relationship at the center transform not only individual families but also the broader child welfare system, offering hope, resilience, and lasting connection.

To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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