



MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL... —by Shahrukh Chishty, MS

Mirror, mirror on the wall...

Who am I?... I am the child who was never protected.

Who am I?... I am the baby who was never fed.

Who am I?... I am the teen who was exploited.

Who am I?... I am the kid who was told to keep a dark secret.

Who am I?... I am someone who will be there for you, to hold you when you are pushing away, to nourish you when you are sick, to protect you when you are afraid...
I am here because there is nowhere I'd rather be.

I SAW TRANSFORMATION IN FRONT OF MY EYES IN THE MOST MAGICAL OF WAYS...

A few years ago, I joined Aldea Children and Family Services in Napa, California, as the new supervisor for its treatment foster care and adoption program. We had a fairly small, closely knit, and good-hearted team with much ambition to make a difference but with many roadblocks ahead. One of the many struggles concerned taking children who were highly wounded and traumatized and finding homes that had the patience and empathy to work with the many faces of hurt that these children expressed. We had several well-intentioned foster families that wanted to help and heal; however, they were confronted by the haunting face of pain and suffering that came in the form of cursing, swearing, lying, stealing, and so much more. Several of these parents had just completed all the requirements: home studies, clearances, and the standard foster parent training. They were ready with arms open to love and care for children removed from their families and even had dreams of maybe someday being the forever family for a child. Of course, this desire was shared by the team in the office as well.

Unfortunately, this goal proved difficult as family after family got frustrated with the behaviors that a child was displaying and decided that they couldn't work with that child any longer. Often this decision resulted in a 7-day notice to remove the child. This transfer was disruptive and devastating for the child who had to move but also impacted the foster family, our team, and the entire morale of the program and agency in many ways. Our amazing team saw a dimming of their light and energy because they felt that no matter what they did, they couldn't be successful.

As a group, we pondered ways to improve this situation. What could we offer our families to make them want to stick it out with the cursing and kicking child? We had limited resources and felt cornered with no way out of this dilemma. Several staff felt resigned to the situation, and it appeared hopeless for some of the kids with more difficult behaviors. Phrases such as "Any parent would give notice on that type of behavior" or "That child is not going to last long" were on the tips of everyone's tongues.

Something had to be done. I felt myself losing faith in the goodness of humanity when we as adults were unable to help care for the most vulnerable of the human creation.

One day I received a text message from my supervisor, who had just heard about a new approach at an FFTA conference. He asked me to look into the 3-5-7 Model of Grief and Loss by Darla Henry and said this might be the magic we were waiting for. At that point, anything was better than continuing to see frustrated parents giving up foster care and staff becoming bitter from their losses. We discovered in this model something that eventually not only helped our children find some stability but also restored hope to our staff and our foster families, who came to believe that their capacity to care and their desire to love could overcome and heal difficult behaviors.

We decided to look at every aspect of our program and to introduce this beautiful and simple model into all aspects of our practice. We started by having the leadership team learn the model and then teach it to our staff and eventually our families. The 3-5-7 Model of Grief and Loss combined with Trauma Competent Caregiver training helped expand our families' capacity for tolerance, patience, and empathy. Through simple activities, all who attempted to participate were transformed.

OUR FAMILIES HAD BEEN THERE ONCE THEMSELVES. THEY LOOKED INTO THE MIRROR AND SAW A REFLECTION OF A CHILD WHO WAS ONCE GIVEN UP ON.

I started working at Aldea on December 7, 2011, and have witnessed many amazing events. None, though, can ever come close to what I experienced the first time this new trauma sensitivity training and the 3-5-7 model were introduced to a group of our families. Having worked with these families for some time, I was familiar with their personalities, tendencies, body language, and much more. The day of training included an activity that our social worker would have done with one of the foster children. It was a letter to anyone they chose to write to...someone who had hurt them, someone they couldn't get closure from. Our leadership team was very anxious about how some of these long-time foster parents would react to such an activity. To our surprise, some of the

sternest and most tough-love parents were in tears by the end of the activity, volunteering to share their letters with the larger group of engaged parents.

Several activities were done that day, ending with a candle-lighting ceremony in honor of someone each family revered. One of the families lit a candle for us at Aldea, fighting back tears as they shared that they had found the place where they could build their forever family and that they felt that they were right where they belonged.

For some of these families, this was the first time they had ever been given the opportunity to get something like this off their chest. They also were able to realize that the children coming into their homes may have never been given a chance to share their pain with anyone and that sometimes their pain had been expressed in anger, fear, and hatred. Our families had been there once themselves. They looked into the mirror and saw a reflection of a child who was once given up on.

The changes we have experienced since adopting this model have been remarkable. The number of removal notices for children has dropped dramatically. We have finalized several adoptions for high-need youth (intensive services youth) who otherwise would have ended up in a higher level of care or in institutionalized care. We have witnessed families using the skills and empathy they learned in their training as they

work with the children in their homes.

Our staff members hold their heads high with pride and satisfaction because they truly are making a difference. Few families have left the agency or decided not to continue doing foster care. Our families speak of the agency with high regard, and several other families want to become foster families with our agency. And yes,

from that day onward, I, too, was transformed. My faith in the goodness and strength of the heart has been renewed because we teach in the language of the heart.

Resources

Henry, D. (2012). *The 3-5-7 model: A practice approach to permanency*. Camp Hill, PA: Sunbury Press.

Schooler, J. (2014). *Wounded children, healing homes: How traumatized children impact adoptive and foster families*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

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