

traditional, punitive methods toward practices that nurture belonging, emotional wellbeing, and a hopeful future for every child.



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# Parenting Without a Past: Healing Invisible Wounds & Nurturing Trust in Foster Care

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## Introduction

What does it mean to welcome a child into your home who looks away when you smile, flinches when you adjust their collar, or goes silent when spoken to? This is often the beginning of foster parenting, not a journey built on memories but on patience, trust, and emotional repair. Unlike traditional parenting, foster care doesn't begin with shared rituals or family legacies. It begins with trauma but can bloom into healing when caregivers show up not as saviours, but as consistent, compassionate humans.

## Understanding the Emotional Landscape of Foster Parenting

Children in foster care often carry invisible wounds. Many struggles with mistrust, emotional dysregulation, and social withdrawal. As a result, foster parents may encounter resistance, aggression, or emotionally numbed responses that stem from early trauma, not defiance.

In such contexts, conventional parenting strategies may fall short. What's needed is **trauma-informed, empathy-led care** that meets the child where they are emotionally and developmentally.

## Routine and Joy: Building Security and Connection

*"Routine is reassurance, and joy is glue."*

Children from disrupted environments find safety in structure. Predictable daily routines from shared meals to bedtime rituals offers a sense of control and belonging. But **attachment is not built on routine alone; it's built on shared joy**.

Simple rituals like painting together, preparing meals, or Friday night storytelling can anchor children emotionally. These routines help form a **relational rhythm** one that communicates, *"You matter. You're safe. I'm here."*

## Beyond Trauma: Strength-Based Parenting Approaches

Healing doesn't only happen through fixing wounds; it also happens through **nurturing strengths**. Foster parenting

that embraces **positive identity development** helps children see themselves as more than their past.

## Suggestions:

- **Celebrate small victories** ("You stayed calm during a hard moment.")
- **Use growth mindset** language ("You're learning how to handle big feelings.")
- **Support creative self-expression** (art, journaling, dance) to explore identity safely.

## Trauma-Informed Practices: Responding, Not Reacting

*"Healing takes time, not demands."*

Understanding trauma responses (fight, flight, freeze) allows caregivers to respond with compassion, not control. Children who have experienced trauma may misread neutral cues as threats, leading to outbursts or withdrawal.

In such moments, tools like **emotion cards**, **feeling thermometers**, deep breathing routines, or simply **validating statements** ("I can see you're upset. I'm here.") can help calm the nervous system and restore a sense of safety. These strategies help children build

emotional awareness and regulation without escalating conflict.

Research supports these interventions: trauma-informed parenting reduces behavioural disruptions and fosters secure attachment (Perry, 2017: 45).

### Parenting Styles that Promote Emotional Growth

*“Connection before correction.”*

While trauma-informed care emphasizes emotional safety, the **parenting style** adopted plays a pivotal role in shaping healing outcomes. Among these, **democratic parenting** stands out for its emphasis on **empathy, consistency, respectful boundaries, and collaborative decision-making.**

Unlike authoritarian approaches that demand obedience, democratic parenting fosters autonomy, mutual respect, and emotional attunement are essential qualities for children recovering from early relational trauma.

### Case Illustration: Vasni’s Journey with Democratic Parenting

Vasni, a 10-year-old girl in foster care, initially showed emotional withdrawal, irritability, and difficulty communicating. Her foster parents

felt unsure wondering if her behaviour reflected defiance or deeper distress.

Through guided sessions, they were introduced to **democratic parenting**, A style that blends structure with emotional connection. With professional support, including activity planning and reinforcement tools, they shifted their approach to focus on connection, choice, and collaboration.

They began to:

- **Hold nightly check-ins** to explore her emotions: “What was hard or happy today?”
- **Use validating language:** “I see you’re upset. It’s okay to feel that way.”
- **Invite autonomy:** Letting her choose her bedtime book or weekend activity.
- **Reinforce positive behaviours** using a star chart (e.g., “talking calmly” or “sharing a feeling”).
- **Create a calm corner** for self-regulation and reflective pauses.

Over 4-5 Session, Vasni showed greater emotional openness, began expressing her needs more clearly, and developed healthier anger regulation. Her sense of **agency and safety grew hallmarks of a democratic parenting environment.**

### Supporting the Parent: Avoiding Burnout, Embracing Joy

Foster parenting is emotionally rich and emotionally taxing. Without regular support, many caregivers’ experience burnout, guilt, or helplessness. This can lead to placement disruptions and emotional distress for both caregiver and child.

#### Protective Measures:

- Peer support groups
- Access to trauma-informed counsellors
- Respite care and routine emotional check-ins
- Recognition and space to celebrate joy, not just manage crisis

#### Conclusion

Foster parenting begins without a shared past but it holds the power to shape a child’s future. With a blend of **trauma-informed care, joyful rituals, strength-focused strategies, and support systems for caregivers,** foster families can offer more than shelter. They can offer **safety, belonging, and healing.**

When foster parents are equipped and supported, children don’t just survive their past but they begin to dream again.

## The Role of Parenting and Emotional Presence

**By Syed Asima Ali,**  
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*“Behind every child who believes in himself is a parent who believed first.”*

Parenting is often misunderstood as simply fulfilling a child’s basic needs—like food, shelter, and clothing. However, real parenting transcends material care and lies deeply rooted in emotional

presence. It involves being genuinely available for the child, not just physically but emotionally, mentally, and relationally. A parent is the child’s first emotional anchor, the first teacher, and the first model of trust and care. True parenting is about creating an environment where the child feels secure, heard, respected, and valued. It requires empathy, patience, consistent guidance, emotional responsiveness, and understanding.

In regions like Kashmir, where poverty, conflict, and displacement have

reshaped childhood experiences, emotional presence is not just important—it is crucial. In such contexts, it can mean the difference between mere survival and healthy development. It can be the deciding factor in whether a child grows up with emotional scars or with emotional resilience.

Through our work at the Human Welfare Voluntary Organization (HWVO), we have witnessed the transformational power of positive parenting. Over the past two years, we have conducted a series of