



TÚSLA
An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency



TIME BANDITS

TARA Whole
Team Foster
Care Approach

INTRODUCTION:

Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) within the Tusla, Dublin South Central (DSC) Fostering Team has been developed through the TARA Project as a whole-team approach. It represents a deliberate shift away from viewing the child as the “problem” to be fixed and instead adopts an ecological lens that recognises the impact of traumatising experiences and ongoing stressors within a child’s wider system (Bloom, 1997). This approach promotes shared responsibility across professionals and foster carers in understanding trauma and responding in ways that support recovery and resilience.

AIMS

- To equip fostering teams and foster carers with the knowledge and practical tools needed to understand trauma and its impact.
- To strengthen carers’ capacity to provide containment, safety and connection.
- To support carers to become consistent emotional anchors for children in their care.
- To build empathetic and trusting relationships between professionals and carers.
- To increase placement stability through improved understanding and attuned responses.
- To ultimately improve foster care stability and long-term outcomes for children.



EVIDENCE AND RATIONALE

Each year, the team reviews data relating to premature foster care disruptions. In 2023, disruptions reached 19 placements. These breakdowns are profoundly traumatic for children, carers and professionals alike.

Placement stability is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes for children in care. Reducing placement disruption therefore became a strategic priority for the team.

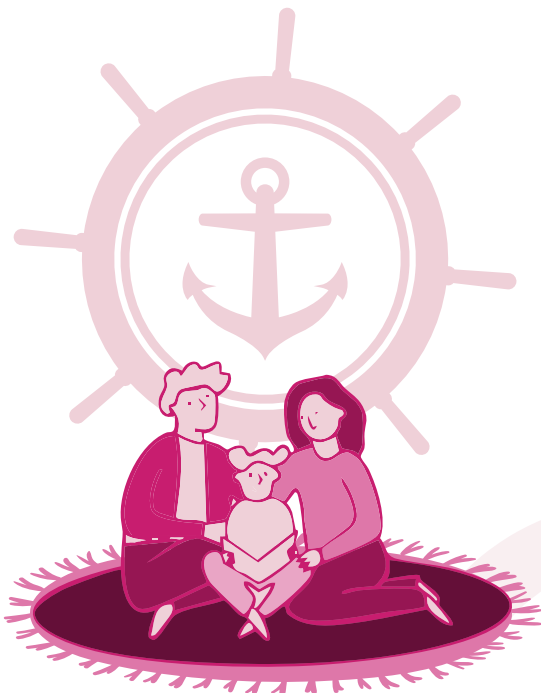
The rationale for this approach is grounded in evidence that trauma-informed understanding improves caregiving responses and strengthens relationships.

Van der Kolk (2003, p.310) notes:

“Caregivers have a tendency to deal with their frustration by retaliating in ways that uncannily repeat the children’s early trauma.”

Where gaps in trauma knowledge exist, caregiving responses may unintentionally compound a child’s trauma (Lotty, 2019). In contrast, viewing behaviour through a trauma-informed lens increases opportunities for attunement, connection and healing (Bath, 2015).

This approach also requires practitioners to reposition themselves — working alongside foster carers in genuine collaboration (Lotty, 2021; Lotty and Lynch 2021). Research and practice wisdom consistently show that strong relationships between professionals and carers are central to placement stability.



TARA PROJECT TOOLS AND RESOURCES USED

The initiative drew from a variety of sources provided by the **Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in Trauma-informed Care: Theory and Practice Cert** at **University College Cork** as well as resources within the **Fostering Connections Programme** the following are some of these resources:

Key Learnings for practice

- Lotty, M. (2023). TARA Practice Model (Trauma, Attachment, Resilience into Action). Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11395102>
- Lotty, M. (2024). The Thermometer of Regulation, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11394136>
- Lotty, M. (2024). Understanding the Drivers of Behaviour: Trauma-informed Practice Tool. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11395217>
- Lotty, M. (2025). TARA - The 3Rs of Building Resilience. Zenodo. Available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/16941074>
- Lotty, M. (2025). TARA - Build Mentalising Tool. Zenodo. Available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/15474987>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Our Language Reconsidered. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344784>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Bodily Sensations Vocabulary Tool. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344826>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Feelings & Emotions Vocabulary Tool. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344872>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Regulating Activities. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344885>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Toolkit of Regulation. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344911>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025). TARA - Embodiment & Breathing Practices. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344934>
- O'Donoghue, M. (2025) . TARA - Mindfulness Practices. Zenodo. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15344963>

TARA Whole Team Foster Care Approach

The initiative involved several key initiatives to embed trauma-informed principles into team culture and practice:

- **The values of trauma-informed care:** emphasising the core values of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, empowerment and cultural sensitivity (SAMHSA, 2023) in our work.
- **Language and Culture:** Introducing trauma-informed language across communication, assessments and care planning to build a shared terminology (e.g. regulation, felt safety, Thermometer of Regulation (Lotty, 2024)).
- **TARA File Review:** A structured review process designed to deepen understanding of the child's lived experience and how trauma informs their current presentation (Lotty, McCormack, Campbell and Stanley, 2024).
- **Psychoeducation for foster carers:** Bespoke 1:1 psychoeducation sessions for foster carers that provide practical strategies to support co-regulation and connection between carers and children as well as psychoeducational materials developed by the team to deepen shared understanding (Lotty, McCormack, Campbell and Stanley, 2024).
- **Psychosocial groupwork intervention for foster carers:** Provision of the Fostering Connections: the Trauma-informed Foster Care Programme for foster carers (Lotty, Dunn-Galvin, and Bantry-White, 2020; Lotty, Bantry-White and Dunn-Galvin 2021; 2022a; 2022b).

Note: Ensure all permissions are in place for children's participation from parents/ guardians and their social worker.



KEY LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

This team-wide approach has highlighted several key learning and reflections:

Key Learnings for practice

- When carers understand the “why” behind behaviours, they are more likely to respond with curiosity rather than consequences. As one carer reflected:
- “I can see a difference in her behaviour, because I’ve also changed the way I handle things.”
- Conversations shift from behavioural management towards emotional safety and regulation.
- Carers value practical tools and strategies more than theory alone.
- Shared language improves collaboration between carers, social workers and educators.
- Empathy increases — both for the child and among the professionals and carers supporting them.
- Trauma-informed practice is not a one-off training intervention; it is an ongoing lens through which practice is understood and delivered.
- The team’s approach has been to provide a solid foundation that enables foster carers to be consistent, compassionate and present for children while identifying the most appropriate next steps in care planning — at the right time.

Key Learnings for Implementation

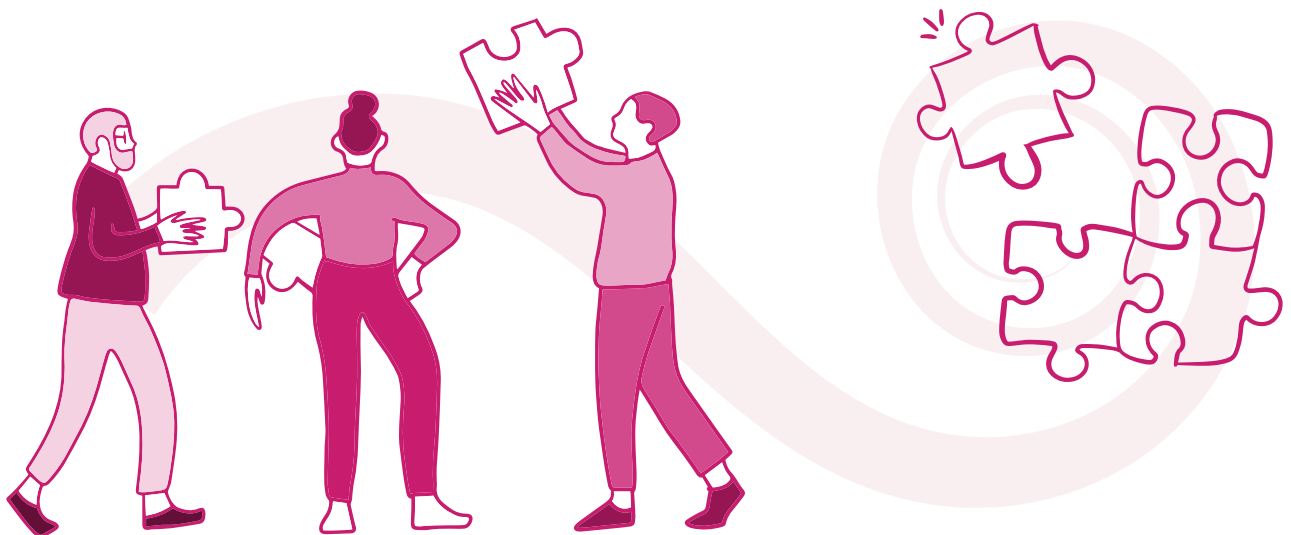
- Senior leadership commitment is essential. Trauma informed practice only embeds effectively when it is championed and prioritised at a strategic, organisational level.
- Protected time supports meaningful learning. Staff need dedicated time for training, reflection, and ongoing development to integrate trauma informed approaches into everyday practice.
- A designated trauma informed lead strengthens coherence. Having a clear champion or lead person ensures consistency, guidance, and momentum throughout implementation.
- Embedding takes time and space. Teams require opportunities to align trauma informed principles with existing systems, processes, and ways of working.
- Consistency must be safeguarded. Strategies are needed to maintain stable, trauma informed practice even when staff turnover, role changes, or resource pressures occur.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADAPTATION

This team-wide approach could be replicated across other fostering teams, with several considerations:

- Provision of ongoing psychoeducation for new staff and foster carers due to turnover.
- Provision of accessible, practical tools that support day-to-day caregiving.
- Embedding trauma-informed principles within supervision, policies and procedures to ensure sustainability.
- Designating a trauma-informed champion within each team.
- Strengthening interdepartmental collaboration, particularly with education (schools) settings. In DSC, early indicators suggest that trauma-informed approaches within education settings have been positively received, highlighting the importance of broader system alignment.



References

Bath, H., 2015, The Three pillars of Trauma Wise Care. Healing in the other 23 hours. Reclaiming children and youth, Winter 2014, V 23. N.4

Bloom, S. (1997). Creating sanctuary: Toward the evolution of sane societies. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lotty, M. (2019). Enhancing Foster Carers' capacity to promote placement stability: Initial development and early-stage evaluation of Fostering Connections: The Trauma-informed Foster Care Programme. (Doctoral Dissertation, University College Cork).

Lotty, M and Lynch, S. (2021). Finding the common ground: families, relationships, and child-focused practice in foster care. Irish Social Worker, 128-146.

<https://cora.ucc.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/5cfb01fd-80c5-4494-8984-dafc56cf8e69/content>

Lotty, M. (2021). Exploring trauma-informed foster care as a framework to support collaborative social worker-foster carer relationships. Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies, 21(1), 34-51.

<https://doi.org/10.21427/g1g5-6x52>

Lotty, M., McCormack, L., Campbell, L., & Stanley, D. (2024). Transforming the child welfare system from the inside out: Integrating trauma-informed practices into foster care services' The Irish Social Worker, Winter, pp. 21-37.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16695>

Lotty, M., Dunn-Galvin, A., & Bantry-White, E. (2020). Effectiveness of a trauma-informed care psychoeducational programme for foster carers—Evaluation of the Fostering Connections Programme. Child Abuse & Neglect, 102.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104390>

Lotty, M., Bantry-White, E. & Dunn-Galvin, A. (2021). Trauma-informed care psychoeducational group-based interventions for foster carers and adoptive parents: A narrative review', Adoption and Fostering, 45(2), pp. 191-214. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759211012492>

Lotty, M., Bantry-White, E. and Dunn-Galvin, A., 2022a. Towards a more comprehensive understanding of fostering connections: The trauma-informed foster care programme: A mixed methods approach with data integration. International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies, 13(1), pp.1-29.

Lotty, M., Bantry-White E., & Dunn-Galvin, A., 2022b. Development of a Psychoeducational Foster Carer Programme Using the Medical Research Council (MRC) Framework for Complex Interventions, Child Care in Practice, 29(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2022.2121683>

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), (2023). Practical guide for implementing a trauma-informed approach. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005. Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive

Van der Kolk, B.A., 2003. The neurobiology of childhood trauma and abuse. Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics, 12(2), pp.293-317.

Acknowledgements

The TARA Project would like to acknowledge the time and commitment put into this initiative by professional(s) from Dublin South Central Integrated Service Area, of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency.

Design and illustration by Becky Hatchett www.beckyhatchett.me

© University College Cork

www.ucc.ie/en/tara/

