

Introduction: Love Them Anyway

Sixty-eight years ago, I was born in Vallejo, California, to a 16-year-old mother who couldn't keep me or my brother, who was ten months younger. The state took us, citing neglect and abandonment, but mostly, it was the fact that she was young and unmarried, in the 1950s.

The State of California placed us with adoptive parents who wanted to raise us up to become priests in the Catholic Church. At first glance, that may sound like it would be a pleasant, quiet, loving home. Unfortunately, it was anything but that. Their home wasn't a haven; it was a storm of physical and emotional abuse. My earliest memory is of my brother and I "decorating" the white leather seats of my adoptive daddy's brand new lemon-yellow Cadillac with a cigarette lighter, igniting a lifetime of fear.

That was my start, but it's not my story's end.

Recently, I drove back to Vallejo, now a trauma coach, to train foster care workers at a local program which serves kids aging out of foster care. As I hit the city limits, Kelly Clarkson's "One Moment in Time" was playing on the radio. I teared up, overwhelmed by the weight of returning to my birthplace to help kids like me. That full-circle moment fuels this book.

Because you're reading this book, I'm assuming that you're a foster parent (or maybe you want to become one), and that means you're doing one of the hardest, most beautiful things a person can do. You've opened your home to a child who's carrying a suitcase full of pain from neglect, abuse, or being bounced from one place to another like a ping-pong ball. You want to give these kids a safe place to land, a chance to heal, maybe even a glimpse of what love feels like.

But let's be real: some days, it's overwhelming. The tantrums, the defiance, the moments when you catch them hiding food or shutting you out, they hit you like a freight train. You're left wondering, "Why do they act like this? Am I doing this wrong? Can I even handle this?"

I see you. I've been there, not as a foster parent, but as one of those kids, scared and scrambled, trying to survive in a world that felt like it was out to get me.

Removed from a mom whose greatest flaw was that she was too young and too un-married for the late 1950s, I was placed in an adoptive home where both of my new parents had grown up in challenging abusive environments, so, when it came time to raise their own children, they repeated those same behaviors. It was what they knew.

I wasn't a "bad" kid, but their reaction to my energy was a reflexive attempt to control, suppress, and punish. And so began an abusive relationship. My brain was being wired through fear, always on high alert, awaiting the next blow.

Trauma and high stress does that to a kid. It wires your brain to be impulsive, reactive. It makes you see threats, even where there aren't any. Your brain feels like it's in permanent survival mode, constantly looking for opportunities to fight or flee or freeze, just to get through the day.

My adoptive parents didn't understand that they were passing on their own trauma to me and my brother. They reacted to our normal kid behaviors with anger, punishment, and attempts to control us. Spoiler: that only made things worse. But I got through it. I found a way to heal, to forgive.

And I've spent the last thirty years helping others do the same. That's why I'm here—to give you the tools I wish my parents had, so you can love these kids through their chaos, equipping them to come out stronger on the other side.

This book isn't a textbook. It's not for therapists or PhDs. It's for *you*, the foster parent who's in the trenches, trying to figure out how to respond when a kid screams for no reason or hides under the bed when it's time for school.

You don't need a psychology degree to make a difference. What you need is curiosity, patience, and what I call *unconditional regard*—a way of looking at a child and saying, “I see you, not just your behavior, and I'm here for you, no matter what.”

That's the heart of this book: helping you understand some of the reasons why foster kids act the way they do and giving you practical, trauma-informed ways to respond that build trust, not walls.

Foster parenting is stepping into a kid's chaos heart-first, determined to be their anchor. You've opened your home to a child carrying fear, loss, or pain. And they act out those emotions in unexpected ways. Maybe they hoard food, shut down, or push you away. Difficult moments can make you feel like you're failing, but you're not.

That kid isn't broken; they're surviving. Their brain has been wired by trauma and toxic stress. The ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study, which we will discuss in more detail later, shows neglect, chaos, or abuse can shape a child's mind.

Their behaviors—screaming, hiding, lying—aren't (merely) defiance; they're instinctive survival strategies, like fight, flight, or freeze. This book is for you, foster parents, doing the hard, holy work of mentoring kids toward healing. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to show up, love them anyway, and keep going.

My personal story is by far not the worst, but it mirrors that of so many children you've probably already cared for. Taken from a young single mom when I was just two years old, my younger brother and I faced an adoptive home where my new father's PTSD from the Korean War and alcoholism met my adoptive mother's mental health struggles, rooted in her own childhood of poverty and abuse. By age 14, I'd been to ten schools, struggling to fit in with each new group of neighborhood kids.

I didn't understand back then why I behaved the way I did. It took me almost 40 years of acting out, struggling, and dealing with the lasting consequences of my early trauma, until I saw myself reflected in the innocent faces of my own small children. That awakening prompted me to study, learn, research, and eventually learn to heal. And now, over the second half of my life, I've learned

from families from native tribes like the Tulalip to fostering families across the US. I've studied under clinicians, shamans, and even dolphins in the Navy.

I've seen what happens when we get this right: kids begin to trust, parents feel empowered, communities provide help and healing. You're here to lead with your heart, to mentor, to give back to kids who've faced fear and loss. Your job is to be their safe haven, showing them that there are people they can trust, one steady moment at a time.

This work is heavy. It'll test your heart and fill you with grief when things go wrong. As Maya Angelou said, "We did what we knew, when we knew better, we did better." Forgive yourself. You're learning, and you're enough. Love them anyway, but love yourself too.

Your strength is their foundation. The foster system's stretched thin. Resources and funding for important interventions can vanish overnight. Training is spotty and you're often left to figure it out alone. This book gives you tools to be the coach these kids need: practical ways to stay calm, build trust, and protect your heart. Each chapter blends my story with science and offers you steps to navigate trauma's challenges, from food insecurity to running away. You'll learn to be a scientist, curious about their world, and a mentor, walking alongside them. I'm here for you too.

Here's how this book works. It's your user's manual, a guide you can pick up when a new kid comes into your care or when an old challenge pops up again. We've got thirteen chapters, each tackling a common issue foster parents face—things like food hoarding, meltdowns, lying, or trouble at school. Each chapter follows the same rhythm:

- **A Story:** A real-life moment, either from my own childhood or my decades training foster care agencies, to show you what it's like for a kid in survival mode.
- **The Science:** A clear, no-jargon explanation of what's happening in the child's brain and body, translated so you can understand it without a science degree.
- **How to Respond:** Practical steps to handle the behavior in a way that heals, not harms, with examples for kids from toddlers to teenagers.
- **Practical Tools:** Exercises, reflections, and strategies to help you coach the child and protect your own emotional energy.

This isn't about quick fixes. Trauma can be deep and complicated, and it takes time to carve a new path. But every time you respond with patience, every time you choose connection over control, you're helping that child's brain learn what safety feels like. You're also protecting your own heart, because fostering is a marathon, not a sprint, and your emotional battery needs to replenish so you can persevere.

When I speak to groups of foster families, I talk a lot about "go zones" and "no-go zones". The go zone is where you stay curious, where you ask, "What happened to you?" instead of "What's wrong with you?" The no-go zone is where you react with anger, punishment, or you're worrying about

things you can't control, like whether a kid will be moved tomorrow or what their future holds. Those no-go zones drain you, and they don't help the kid. This book will help you stay in the go zone, where healing happens.

I've spent thirty years working with trauma and toxic stress—collaborating with and being mentored by fantastic pioneers in trauma and brain science: esteemed yet edgy clinicians, indigenous peoples, foster care agencies, police officers, many children in the system, and even corporate CEOs (former foster youth like me). I've seen what happens when we get this right: kids start to trust, parents feel empowered, and communities come together to support these kids.

This is the reason most of us began working with foster youth—to provide a safe environment so that a child will dare to grow, to serve, to lead with our heart and mentor the next generation, to give back. And it's why I'm inviting you to connect with me at the end of this book. I speak to foster family support groups, agencies, anyone who wants to build a trauma-informed network for kids. If you're part of a group, reach out so we can keep this conversation going.

One more thing before we dive in. Fostering is unpredictable. A kid might be with you for a week, a year, or until they age out. You can't control that, and, as much as we can get caught up in it, worrying about it is a no-go zone. What you *can* do is make every day count. Every time you show a kid they're worth loving, you're adding power to their pro-social resilience. You're giving them a tool they'll carry wherever they go—whether it's brushing their teeth, trusting a teacher, or believing they're enough. That's your power as a foster parent. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to show up, love them anyway, and keep going.

All of which requires that you love yourself too. You've heard the phrase “Hurting people hurt people”? Well, healed people help others heal, too. We're going to spend a fair amount of time throughout this book, ensuring that *you* are using your healing rituals, so that you are nurtured, healthy and resilient, so that you are adequately equipped to help the children in your care attain those same aspirations.

So, here's my ask: commit to this journey with an open heart. Read this book one chapter at a time, try the tools, and lean on the resources you'll find in the Appendix, like the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). You're not alone, and you're already doing something incredible.

Let me show you, in the pages of this book, exactly how to care for your children while also caring for yourself, without allowing the Department of Children's Services to control your life or your household.

Sincerely,

Frank Grijalva

Ready to talk about how I can help you navigate your challenges already? Let's hop on a call at midwesttrauma.org

A quick word about mentors

I always thought I was built to do things myself. And I was intelligent and adaptive enough to survive, for the most part, but it wasn't until I found a safe mentor that I began my healing journey. Find your mentors, don't do it alone. In the Navy diver community, we learn that "2 is 1, 1 is none". Find your ride or dies and live life to the fullest.

Chapter 1: The Fear-Built Brain - Understanding Trauma and Survival Responses

My Story: A Brain Built in Fear

As I mentioned, my earliest memory is a blur of fear in a lemon-yellow Cadillac, its white leather seats gleaming. I was maybe three, left alone with my little brother in our adoptive parents' new car. They were smokers, so we knew how the cigarette lighter worked. On this sunny morning, we had been left alone to wait in the car while our parents ran an errand. Without their presence, we experimented. We discovered that the lighter made a distinctive circular, black hole in the bright white leather seats. Delighted, we decided to “decorate” those seats with polka dotted burn marks. I remember feeling earnest and industrious. Until my parents returned.

My father, scarred by Korean War PTSD and alcoholism, and my mother, haunted by poverty and abuse, didn't see kids playing. They saw willful destruction. My father's harsh punishment left a perfect circle burn mark on my thigh that lingered for decades. My brother still carries a bald spot on the back of his head where the lighter struck him, even though more than fifty years have passed.

What does a two or three year old child learn from searing intense pain delivered by an adult who is in a rage? They may learn to never do that again, but at what cost in connection? Trust is lost, fear prevails and the brain is wired to watch others in fear. On guard but with no understanding, no mentoring in how to return to safety in this relationship, a kid's brain isn't being taught how to trust or connect.

Our home was one where terror ruled. My father once chased five-year-old me as I ran from him. When he realized he wasn't going to catch me, he threw a rock, knocking me down instead. My brain was built in fear, and I'm not alone.

I share my story to show how fear shaped my brain from the start. Foster youth in your home carry similar invisible scars, wired by trauma or toxic stress to survive, not thrive. Their yelling, hiding, or lying isn't about you; it's their brain's desperate bid to stay safe in a world that has felt anything but. As a foster parent, you're not just providing a bed—you're stepping into their storm, mentoring them toward trust. To do that, you need to understand what trauma is and how it builds a fear-based brain. Let's unpack the science and survival strategies behind their behaviors, so you can see their world more clearly and guide them with curiosity, instead of control.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma and toxic stress wire a child's brain differently, priming it for survival, rather than the connection that babies born into a “good enough” home are wired for. Trauma can strike as a single event, like a car accident, or witnessing violence, or unfold as complex trauma, a relentless drip of

neglect, abandonment, physical or emotional abuse across developmental phases and yes, even in the womb.

My story began with the latter. That home, steeped in my adoptive father's alcohol-fueled PTSD and my mother's mental health struggles from her own abusive childhood, was a crucible of fear. Meeting my birth family in my 30's and hearing the stories of my mom and her sisters' lives have helped me understand that some genetic and environmental contributions affected my brother and me from the beginning also.

Toxic stress is different from trauma, but they are interconnected. Toxic stress often looks like the grinding, unescapable chaos of poverty, home or food instability, or unpredictable caregivers, all of which combine to reshape a child's brain, in much the same way that water, over time, can carve deep trenches in the hardest of rock formations.

Foster kids arrive with their brain's alarm system, the amygdala and other structures, locked in overdrive, constantly scanning for danger. Meanwhile other vital parts of their brain which are responsible for logic, impulse control, and planning, go underdeveloped due to the ways in which some parts of the brain aren't "turned on" or activated to development, in the face of chronic, toxic stress.

We'll talk more about this throughout the book but basically it's like when your favorite movie spaceship is under attack and the Captain says something like, "Turn off power to all non-essential systems. All power to warp speed!" Those non-essential systems are eventually turned back on as soon as the space heroes have fled to safety.

Unfortunately, in our brains, those "non-essential" systems don't always have the luxury of being turned on, because they can only turn on in safety. Many of our children have not been in a safe, stable environment long enough for their brains to recognize they are safe and they can begin to turn on these other systems.

One of the most accepted definitions of being traumatized is to experience an event or multiple events in which the child perceives that they or someone they love could die, that it's out of their control, and they can't escape it. It is their *perception* that matters, not the reality of the events. We often dismiss injuries or events that the child has experienced and internalized because we can see the bigger picture of the situation. We see their behavior but, because there are no visible wounds, we can too often dismiss these behaviors as children being naughty rather than the effects of trauma in a developing brain.

This can be the beginning of a confusing emotional and behavioral avalanche for everyone.

This isn't "bad behavior"; it's survival. Their brain defaults to strategies honed in fear: fight (yelling, hitting), flight (running, hiding), or freeze (shutting down, dissociating), often referred to as an "involuntary threat response". As a foster parent, your role isn't to judge these responses but rather to mentor kids through them, guiding them toward trust and safety with patience and

curiosity. Sometimes we have to get reactive when there is a chance of someone getting hurt. Debriefing, knowing how the brain works and creating and practicing a proactive plan afterwards is critical.

What You See

Foster kids experience trauma 2 to 2.5 times more than kids from “good enough homes”. How they get there is the result of millions of examples of not knowing better, impulse, and finding out the hard way.

At nine, my family was living in Panama’s Canal Zone. One day, I stepped on glass while playing outside barefoot, despite my adoptive parents’ oft-repeated rules to always wear shoes. The gash bled profusely, but I didn’t cry and I definitely didn’t tell them. Terrified of their anger more than the physical pain, I wrapped my foot in a dirty towel and hid the injury for days, limping through school. When my parents did finally discover my injury and took me to the doctor, they were shocked to discover how close I had been to losing my foot completely, to infection. The doctor said, “If you had brought him in 12 hours later, we would be taking his foot”.

That decision to hide my injured foot wasn’t rooted in stubbornness; it was survival. My fear-built brain was prioritizing avoidance of my parents’ anger over my own desire to walk pain-free. I couldn’t trust them to take care of me. Fear was in control because I had no reason to expect that my parents would respond in any way other than how my father had reacted when I “decorated” his new car. Nothing was ever done to change the way I had experienced that event, so my brain assumed that every similar situation would garner the same response from my parents—anger, yelling, and (often) physical punishment.

Without re-attunement, extensive consoling and nurturing of the young child, there is no stimulation of those parts of the brain related to logic and future consequence. The brain is activated and fueled by the fear of remembered physical punishment.

Foster kids often act in unexpected ways, their brains wired for survival. You might find food stashed under their bed, because the memory of hungry nights continues to haunt them. Or you may catch them lying about small things, an instinctive response to dodge disapproval and shame. You can’t always know what drives their behavior, so stay calm and curious. Frustration without clear communication and an established relationship is a no-go zone.

Meltdowns, like tantrums, screaming, throwing objects, signal overwhelming emotions which are difficult to name, while a blank stare or refusal to move might be their brain’s response to an uncertain, chaotic environment. These aren’t acts of defiance; **it’s involuntary**. They’re tools of a brain wired to survive. It takes time to trust, the experience of the child is often that they are most hurt when they let their guard down. So they will use a lot of energy pushing against your boundaries, testing the safety of the home you provide for them. Their life depends on it.

Let me share a quick pro tip I learned from my mentors Dr. Robert Macy and Dr. Sandra Bloom: It's called **Q-TIP: Quit Taking It Personally!!**

Practice it, internalize it, your emotional life will be so much better for it. You see, their reactions aren't about you. These behaviors are echoes of a past where safety was nonexistent. Stay curious, instead of defensive. Ask yourself, "What's driving this?" instead of reacting harshly. Your calm presence signals you're a safe haven, rather than another threat. It's easy to dismiss behavior we don't understand so remember, this child's threat detection system was likely built to react to subtle microcues that you might not even be aware you are doing, but, for them, it can be the first sign of terror, triggering a violent reaction that we don't understand.

This "involuntary threat response" is something we all experience at some point in our emotional lives and it is important to remember that it is a brain in survival.

The Science: A Fear-Based Brain

Trauma shrinks a child's capacity to trust, keeping their amygdala (their "survival" brain, located at the base of a person's skull, just above the start of the spinal column) on high alert while stunting the prefrontal cortex's growth (located at the front of your brain, in your forehead). Because of this, kids' brains are reactive, not reflective, their nervous system primed for danger. Bessel van der Kolk emphasizes that this emergency threat detection system stays "on," scanning for threats even in safe settings, like your home.

My adoptive home, with its volatile mix of parental responses to my youthful behaviors, kept me in this state, always braced for the next blow, like the rock my father threw to stop me from running away from him or my mother threatening me with a soup ladle while counting the number of times I chewed each bite of food.

Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman's research on repetition offers a coaching framework, suggesting it takes approximately 11 exposures for a new experience to feel familiar and familiar makes it more likely to happen. Then it takes an additional 20 to 40 repetitions to begin to forge a new neural synapse. It is the brain responding to repeated activity which helps them begin to actually *trust* you won't shame them for mistakes.

A foster kid's brain, built in fear, defaults to survival responses, fight, flight, freeze, because these behavior patterns kept them alive in chaotic or abusive environments in the past. Toxic stress compounds this, elevating stress hormones, which can disrupt emotional regulation and memory formation. Additionally, once chaos becomes a habit, people young and old will often work to *maintain* chaos because that's the state that they are comfortable in, even though it is not necessarily safe.

Yet, all is not lost. Consistent, caring relationships rewire these survival responses, gradually calming the amygdala and strengthening the prefrontal cortex. Your steady presence, and coaching

your child with a new strategy, are what brings the science to life, reshaping their brain one safe interaction at a time.

How to Respond

Your job isn't to overhaul their brain. It's to be a safe haven, a steady anchor in their storm. When they lash out or hide, stay calm and if you can't (because we're only human, after all), recover as quickly as possible, acknowledge your reaction, apologize, and tell your child why it's important for you to reconcile. Attempting to control or punish when you are angry or frustrated will only trigger more fear and damage the trust you have begun to build.

Use curiosity: "What's going on for you?" or "What do you need right now?"—that shows you're not the enemy. Consistency is your superpower—showing up daily and keeping promises builds trust.

Q-TIP: Quit Taking It Personal keeps you grounded when their survival strategies feel personal. Act like a scientist: observe their triggers (e.g., loud voices lead to sudden behavior changes), and tailor your approach. Avoid consequences that feel like control; instead, use calm talks to set boundaries, like, "What's the easiest way for me to know that you need a snack?"

Over the years the most successful strategy has been abundance rather than restriction until safety and relationship is established. Without safety and relationship their brains perceive you as something they have to work around, not someone they can trust. Mentor, don't manage. Your curiosity and consistency show them safety is real, rewiring their brain for connection.

Practical Tools

- **Curiosity Questions:** Ask, "What do you need right now?" to show you're safe.
- **Consistency Ritual:** Set a daily connection moment—bedtime chats, breakfast check-ins.
- **Q-TIP Check:** When triggered, pause, breathe, and remind yourself: Quit Taking It Personal.
- **Safety Mantra:** Say things like, "You're safe with me," to calm their nervous system.
- **Observe Like a Scientist:** Note their triggers (e.g., loud voices) to tailor your approach.

Moving Forward

Your foster kid's brain is wired for survival, but you're rewiring it for trust. Every calm moment and every curious question lays a brick in their wall of security and resilience. Next, we'll explore how to be their safe haven, turning fear into connection.