Note: Be sure to report child abuse to CPS or Law Enforcement, as appropriate, prior to starting FAST-T. Remember, your role is not to investigate abuse but to treat trauma-related mental health symptoms youth may be experiencing.

The information you gather using FAST-T worksheets is for therapeutic purposes and should not be shared with lawyers. Because the goal is not to gather facts, and these are not forensic interviews, memories shared in FAST-T may contain inaccuracies that can sometimes be used to attack youths’ credibility in court.

While most youth who experience a trauma will recover within a few months without a need for counseling, some will continue to experience ongoing distress that gets in the way of daily life. Research on what helps kids with ongoing distress has found that talking about trauma memories and unhelpful trauma-related thoughts is a powerful way to help them.

Why do memories matter?

Remembering traumatic events can lead to intense feelings, so many youths try to push trauma memories away. While pushing away memories can give relief in the moment, many youths find the memories flood back anyway, in the form of nightmares or recollections that pop up while they are trying to go about their lives. Facing memories together with a counselor can help the memories become less painful and disruptive.

Why talk with youths about their trauma memories?

Here are a few reasons we do it, even though it can cause distress temporarily:

- We don’t want to leave kids/teens all alone with these memories. It can be isolating and painful to hold the memories alone.
- We also know that avoiding difficult memories and feelings does not make them go away or help kids feel better; in fact it can be more harmful to kids/teens over the long term.
- Youths with ongoing posttraumatic stress often remember traumas in a distorted or unhelpful way. Looking carefully at what happened can clear up misunderstandings or unhelpful ways of thinking.
- Youths learn that they can seek support about what happened without being judged or blamed or rejected.

What are key strategies for talking with youth about trauma memories?

- Show that you think it’s okay to talk about these things without feeling embarrassed or ashamed.
Don’t assume you know what a youth feels or experienced. Ask them. Let them tell you.

Don’t judge or blame them for what happened.

Do assume their actions at the time of the trauma made sense under the circumstances, given what they knew, what they expected, their past experiences, and their developmental needs. In the case of abuse or assault, youth may have been manipulated in ways they might not realize. (Find some examples here).

Praise them!

Don’t ask leading questions. Instead ask open-ended questions.

Why is this important?

- Kids often say “yes” to questions if they don’t know the right answer.
- Kids sometimes make something up if they don’t know how to answer.
- Kids sometimes say what they think adults want to hear, especially if they are nervous.
- This can lead to false allegations or other bad outcomes.

Helpful (open ended) questions:

- “Tell me all about what happened. What happened first/next/after that”
- “Ok, so [restate what they said in their own words]...what happened right before that/what happened right after that?”
- “I’m not sure I understand. You said [their words], and then [their words]...what happened in between?

Unhelpful/problematic (leading) questions:

- “Did he touch your private parts?”
- “Was it Gerald who hurt you?”
- “Were you both naked?”

If you encounter unhelpful or distorted thinking, you can use the ideas on FAST-T pages 10-14 to help support the youth in shifting how they think about what happened.

Which memories do youth need to talk about?

In some evidence-based trauma treatments, it is considered helpful to talk about the most upsetting memories. These often show up as intrusive thoughts, recollections and flashbacks. It is not necessary to talk about ALL the trauma memories the youth has, especially if the traumas were part of a recurrent pattern.
In FAST-T we leave it up to the youth to pick one memory to share if they are comfortable. Youth are welcome to share other memories, but this is not required due to the brief nature of the intervention.

What if I have strong reactions to hearing a youth’s trauma memory?

- Try not to lose your composure (e.g., crying) or the youth might not feel comfortable sharing with you or with others in the future.
- If you do show your feelings (such as eyes tearing up), explain that you are feeling sad about what they had to go through, but that you are proud of them and glad they shared their story.
- Notice if you’re wanting to avoid conversations with the youth about their trauma.
- If you need it, get support outside of sessions by talking to a supervisor or colleagues (while protecting the youth’s confidentiality).
- Exercise good self-care. If you find yourself preoccupied with youths’ trauma experiences in a lasting way that is affecting your work and home life, check out the helpful strategies and resources here: [https://socialworklicensemap.com/blog/coping-with-secondary-trauma/](https://socialworklicensemap.com/blog/coping-with-secondary-trauma/)

What should I do with the youth’s written trauma account?

- Trauma accounts should never be kept in the youth’s school or medical record.
- Following FAST-T the youth can take the written account if they want, or destroy it, or you can destroy it, to protect their confidentiality.
- If the youth chooses to keep the written account, you could talk through what they plan to do with it. Would they like to share it with a supportive caregiver or parent? Will they keep it private? How can it be stored safely?
- Again, it is not advisable to share FAST-T written accounts with lawyers/courts.

Are there situations when I should skip the trauma memory share part of treatment?

Sometimes it is unclear if the child actually has a trauma memory. This can be because:

- The child was too young
- CPS investigated and abuse was determined to be “unfounded”
- Allegations of abuse only arose in the context of parental custody disputes and may be influenced by parental animosity or legal considerations.

Unless the child has a memory they are interested to process with you, it may be better to skip the trauma memory share component of FAST-T under these circumstances. You do not want to risk creating or reinforcing a false memory.