Meeting the Developmental, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs of Children in Foster Care

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Children and adolescents in foster care face signi cantly increased risk of having developmental, behavioral, and mental health issues. Healthcare providers play a critical role in addressing the interplay of complex childhood trauma and toxic stress on the developmental, behavioral, and mental health of this vulnerable population.

Many children in foster care have complex trauma histories and are at risk for toxic stress. Toxic stress, de ned as the “prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in the absence of the bu ering protection a orded by stable, responsive relationships,” signi cantly impacts early childhood development (Garner & Shonko , 2012, p. e225). Toxic stress can disrupt the developing architecture of the brain and adversely a ect the development of adaptive capabilities and coping skills during early childhood (Garner & Shonko , 2012; Shonko & Garner, 2012). Research has associated exposure to complex trauma with increased risk for mental health disorders including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Greeson et al., 2011). Additionally, research has shown a dose- dependent e ect of exposure to adverse and traumatic events during childhood on increased risk of mental health, substance use, sexual health, and physical health issues (Anda et al., 2006).

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