

MANAGING CHILD BEHAVIOR

DISCIPLINE, derived from the Greek word for teaching, helps children control their behavior and increases their self-esteem. This is very different from simply punishing children, which may relieve adult frustration but does little to change behavior. Children can only heal from trauma through positive interactions with their parents.

While structure and rules are important, there must also be an understanding of how much a traumatized child is capable of regulating their emotions and behavior. Most child management techniques are based on the child's need to maintain attachment to parent— but children in care may react to discipline with fear, sensing rejection. Using consequences is only effective if a child is able to think through his actions—many traumatized children are too impulsive and overwhelmed to benefit.

The following suggestions can help foster/adoptive parents to cope effectively with children who don't respond to traditional types of discipline:

Identify underlying dynamics causing behavior.

- What is their behavior saying? Children express their feelings and communicate their needs through actions, not words. Therefore it is important to figure out what skills the child lacks (cognitive, social, emotional) and help them develop these skills. Work with them to find solutions to their behavioral problems.
- Identify "triggers" that cause them to act a certain way. There is almost always a pattern for when children behave inappropriately. Observe them. Keep a journal. It is useless to ask children "why" they did something because they really don't know. Instead ask what happened? Re-trace the sequence of events.
- Anger is frequently a cover for more painful emotions such as fear or sadness—remain calm and don't overreact. Try to de-escalate the situation.

Remember safety is the #1 issue for traumatized children.

- Help child to feel safe by reassuring him, especially when he's in trouble.
- Don't get angry—it only makes the child more fearful and defensive.

Provide environment that enhances child's growth.

- Try to ignore negative behavior, unless it is harmful to others. Pick your battles.
- Use positive reinforcement. Find the child's areas of strength and build on them.
- Really listen to the child and help the child feel comfortable expressing feelings.
- Communicate with "I" messages (e.g. "I feel sad when you...", "It makes me happy to see you...") to decrease defensiveness and increase self-esteem.
- Help child control behavior by keeping close to you & teaching self-regulation.
- Avoid criticizing or lecturing, instead build up child's self esteem through praise.
- Recognize child's "rhythm"—to help child understand and manage his behavior.
- Provide adequate supervision, remove environmental "hazards" & temptations.
- Traumatized children often don't recognize their own needs, they're too busy being hypervigilant.

Interventions should be done in a supportive rather than a confrontative manner

- Behavioral outbursts are an opportunity to develop attachment – help the child to calm down in a gentle way (e.g. talking quietly, rocking or just staying nearby). Remember the child is not doing it deliberately but is simply overwhelmed. Afterwards discuss problem-solving with child.
- Aim to intervene early when problems are small and interventions can be low-key (try to identify “triggers” that escalate into behavioral problems).
- Rather than focusing on undesirable behavior, help child learn alternate ways to get needs met (children need to believe that they have some control over lives).
- Try to identify child’s unmet developmental needs-what is his actual age?
- Control issues need to be addressed in a calm manner, appreciating child’s need for some autonomy (try to make it a win/win situation).
- When parent’s requests lead to confrontation, children are feeling threatened and struggling for control, therefore parents need to avoid escalating situations and decide what the important issues are and what can be ignored.
- Offer logical consequences to school aged children but expect that they won’t always be able to respond as desired. It takes constant repetition to unlearn old habits. Be patient.
- Use open-ended options (e.g. “if you get homework done, you can...”) instead of ultimatums, then child decides and has to accept consequences of his actions.
- Provide two good choices, recognizing child’s limits in making decisions.
- Give misbehaving child a “time-in”- a specific time to stay with you to provide external controls and to model 'calm' behavior (done in a nurturing manner). **

Aggression and hyperactive behavior

- Goal is to help child discharge anger, frustration, tension in an acceptable way.
- If parent is afraid of child’s behavior, child will only feel more out of control.
- Encourage child to express feelings verbally instead (e.g. “you seem angry...”).
- Let angry teens storm off-it’s a safety mechanism (confronting only escalates).
- Take a time out yourself, e.g. “we’ll talk when you (or I) have calmed down”.

Need for Affection

- Nurturing precedes trust, both are the parents’ responsibility.
- Use any opportunity to show affection (verbal or physical).
- Use quick, affectionate exchanges if child is initially reluctant.
- Children need gentle but persistent encouragement to interact with parents.
- Children often avoid contact for fear of being rejected or seeming “odd”.

Ask yourself:

Is your request reasonable? (These children are often emotionally 2-5 years behind).
What are the real issues? (Lying/stealing are symptoms of anxiety, not morality).
Is this about control? (Some things you can’t control-e.g. what goes in/out of child).
Controlling your own reactions is the first step in maintaining a therapeutic environment.