

# Managing Child Behavior

**Foster Connection**  
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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 the 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.

## PROVIDE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT ENHANCES THE 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 the child control behavior by keeping close to you & teaching self-regulation.
- Avoid criticizing or lecturing; instead, build up the child's self-esteem through praise.
- Recognize the child's "rhythm" to help the 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.

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

- ✓ 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.

## 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.

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## 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 the 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 the child learn alternate ways to get needs met (children need to believe that they have some control over their lives).
- Try to identify the child’s unmet developmental needs—what is his actual age?
- Control issues need to be addressed in a calm manner, appreciating the child’s need for some autonomy (try to make it a win/win situation).
- When parents’ requests lead to confrontation, children feel threatened and struggle 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 the child decides and has to accept the consequences of his actions.
- Provide two good choices, recognizing the child’s limits in making decisions.
- Give the 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

- The goal is to help children discharge anger, frustration, and tension acceptably.
- If a parent is afraid of the child’s behavior, the child will only feel more out of control.
- Encourage the 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 for 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 the 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.**