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Children in Foster Care and Problem Behaviors

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All children, even those not in care, have behavior problems; some behaviors more difficult to accept than others. Some of these behaviors can cause children to be aggressive, hostile and generally difficult to live with. As foster parents we should be first and foremost the child's teacher. Many children coming into care have lived in dysfunctional families and simply may not know acceptable behaviors. As foster parents we need to create a plan to assist each child in meeting expectations and accommodating the rules.

Why the Acting Out?

Children react with aggression because of fear, uncertainty or simple frustration. When expectations are raised, children may become fearful that they can't accomplish what is expected. The fear may become overwhelming causing children to react to others in a negative manner. The type of aggression exhibited is determined by the problems that are presented. Sometimes subtle actions like not eating their food or bed-wetting may be their response. Sometimes more violent actions become a



way of controlling the situation. It becomes clear that even if the children can't communicate their frustration, they can act out the frustration and achieve attention.

How to Respond?

Balancing children's needs for independence along with parental authority is one of the foster parent's greatest challenges.

First, recognize that a child deciding **not** to comply with an instruction also means the child is learning the first step in choosing outcomes. Also recognize that the individual child's age and developmental level determines the foster parent's choice of actions. A few tips for dealing with difficult behaviors:

- Discipline is not punishment. Discipline is teaching/training a child to learn self-control. Good behavior is a result of wanting to behave, not of being force to behave.
- Evaluate each child's limitations and set expectations accordingly. Don't set the child or yourself up for defeat and more frustration. Unrealistic expectations simple create lose-lose scenarios.

- Recognize the early warning signs of frustration in your child. When children are faced with a challenge or situation that they don't know how to handle, anxiety begins to take over.
- Offer support, provide a smile, a helpful attitude and let them problem solve for themselves. Offer suggestions, don't mandate solutions; this will help develop confidence, improved skills and self-control.
- Create a discipline plan for each child. Know ahead of time how to deal with misbehavior. Planning and practice will lessen the anger and distress of the behavior.
- Use "time out," "cool off" or "private space" to isolate the child from the situation and to create an opportunity for self-control. As cooler heads prevail discuss what other behavioral options might have been chosen. The objective is to teach how to re-establish self-control.
- Sometimes **do nothing** is the best answer. Non-reaction is useful for behaviors that are not aggressive, like whining or pestering. If adults intervene too early on a situation, children don't have a chance to meet the challenge themselves and don't acquire new skills.
- Once you decide to respond to the child, do so quickly. The delay of your response until a task is finished or a conversation completed takes away from its effectiveness.
- Be consistent in the warnings you give and the consequence involved. Begging or whining should not change the outcome of the consequence.
- Establish that you have the child's attention when you are discussing the problem behavior.

- Do not lose your temper—the best teacher is by example. Know your own warning signs and “cool off” before engaging the child. If it takes you a few moments to regain composure then just stand silent until you have.
- Rewards for good behavior can be an effective strategy as long as the “rewards” are earned—earned by demonstrating self-control. Not, here's a reward, be good but: since you've managed today without a blow-up, here's a reward.

The total discipline plan should be consistent in order for the child to progress towards the goal of self-control. If the behavior gets worse after a plan has been implemented, chances are it's working.

Children will test to the limit to see if the rules are going to be enforced. Address one or two issues at a time until the child becomes accustomed to the way you are dealing behavior.



When you feel confident in handling the behavior, children will realize this and change their behavior accordingly. Remember, you are the child's teacher—we all are what our parents taught us.

