

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. It is especially important in the case of children who have been traumatized that parents look for ways to interact positively with them. This will help children to heal from their trauma. 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. The following suggestions can help foster/adoptive parents to cope effectively with trauma-related behaviors.

Identify Underlying Dynamics Causing Behavior

- Many behaviors have more than one possible cause and possibly more than one effective intervention (e.g. bedwetting) use observation and insight to try to figure out the underlying emotion and be creative with interventions.
- Anger is frequently a cover for more painful emotions, such as fear or sadness. Remain calm and don't overreact. Try to reassure and comfort the child.
- The #1 cause of undesirable behavior is the inappropriate expression of feelings, therefore teach the child how to identify and express emotions in an acceptable way.

Most child management techniques are based on the child's need to maintain attachment to parents - the children in care, may react to discipline with fear, sensing rejecting. Using consequences is only effective if the child is able to think through his actions. Many traumatized children are too impulsive or frightened to benefit.

Remembering Safety is the #1 Issue for Traumatized Children

- Help child to feel safe by reassuring him, especially when he's in trouble.
- Keep misbehaving child close to an adult in a loving way. Provide external controls but also model behavior so child can learn regulation ("time-in").
- Don't get angry, it only escalates the situation and makes the child more fearful.

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.
- Use "active listening" to understand the child's feelings, not just his words.
- 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.

Use Discipline that Encourages Relationship Building and Mutual Trust

- Promote attachments by connecting discipline with nurturing.
- Help child control behavior by keeping close to you and 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" and temptations.

Interventions Should be Done in a Supportive Rather than Confrontative Manner

- Behavioral outbursts are an opportunity to develop attachments-help the child to calm down in a gentle way (e.g. talking quietly, rocking or just letting alone for a while).

- Aim to intervene early when problems are small and interventions can be low-key (try to identify “triggers” that escalate behavioral problems).
- Rather than focusing on undesirable behavior, help child learn alternate ways to get needs met (children need to believe that they can succeed).
- Try to identify child’s unmet developmental needs (e.g. affection, stimulation).
- Use behavioral modification to interrupt behavioral that have become habits.
- Control issues need to be addressed in a calm manner, appreciating child’s need for some autonomy (see as a win/win situation).
- When parent’s request lead to confrontation, children experience a surge for autonomy, therefore parents need to avoid escalating situation 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.
- Use open-ended options (e.g. if you get homework done, you can.....) Instead of ultimatums.
- Provide two good choices, recognizing child’s limits in making decisions.

Aggression and Hyperactive Behavior

- Goal is to help child discharge anger, frustration, and tension in an acceptable way.
- If parent is afraid of child’s feelings, so will the child-let him express feelings.
- Let angry teens storm off-it’s a safety mechanism (confronting only escalates)
- Take a time out yourself (e.g. “we’ll talk when your or I have calmed down”).

Need for Affection

- Nurturing precedes trust.

- Use any opportunity to show affection (verbal or physical).
- Use quick affectionate exchanges if child is initially reluctant.
- Children need gentle and persistent encouragement to interact with parents.
- Children often avoid contact for fear of being rejected or seeming odd.
- Children do not recognize their own needs if too busy being hyper vigilant.

Ask Yourself

Is your request reasonable? (These children are often emotionally 2-3 years behind) What are the real issues? (Lying, stealing are symptoms of anxiety, not moral issues) Is this about control? (Certain things you can't control -e.g. What goes in and out of child) Controlling your own reactions is the first step in maintaining a therapeutic environment.

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