

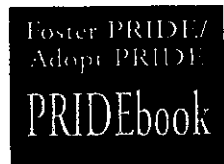
# Session Six

## Meeting Developmental Needs: Discipline

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## **Session Six**

### **Competencies and Objectives**



**Session Six:  
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### **Resource 6-A**

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#### **Competencies**

Prospective foster parents and adoptive parents:

- Can maintain a home environment which prevents and reduces injuries.
- Know the importance of creating a supportive and accepting family environment.
- Know the importance of providing unconditional positive support.
- Understand the relationship between meeting needs and behavior.
- Know the goals of effective discipline and how these goals relate to the agency's policy on discipline.
- Know developmentally appropriate, non-physical disciplinary techniques used to meet the goals of effective discipline.
- Know how to use discipline strategies with children who have experienced trauma.

#### **In-Session Learning Objectives**

As a result of their participation in this training program, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

1. Explain why it is challenging to discipline children in need of family foster care and adoption.
2. Define discipline.
3. List the goals of effective discipline.
4. Explain the difference between discipline and punishment.
5. Explain the agency's policy on discipline.
6. Identify the negative effects of physical punishment.
7. Explain why the agency has a policy against spanking or hitting children.

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8. Identify the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities needed to instill effective discipline.
  9. Explain the meaning of behavior.
  10. Describe the three categories in the range of discipline techniques.
  11. State the factors affecting one's choice of a particular method of discipline.
  12. Identify specific guidelines for using disciplinary techniques with children who have been abused and neglected.
  13. Describe strategies to prevent behavioral crises.
  14. Describe strategies to de-escalate a crisis situation.
  15. Identify crisis situations in which emergency assistance is necessary.

### **At-Home Learning Objectives**

Through reviewing, at home, the information in their PRIDEbook, prospective foster parents and adoptive parents will be able to:

1. List the good health care practices needed for children's growth and development.
2. Name the components of a formal and informal education program that increases children's self-esteem.
3. Explain the reasons for educating children about their sexual development, and for providing a safe, supportive environment for sexual development.
4. Describe the role of team members in responding to children's extreme or unusual behaviors.
5. Apply an understanding of the content of Session Six to past and present experiences with discipline.
6. Identify issues affecting their ability and willingness to work effectively with birth parents, based on the information in this session's A Birth Parent's Perspective.

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## **Session Six**

### **Agenda**

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**Resource 6-B**

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#### **Part I: Welcome and Connecting with PRIDE**

- A. Welcome and Review of Competencies, Objectives, and Agenda
- B. Making Connections from Session Five
- C. Making Connections with Assessment, Licensing, and Certification

#### **Part II: Understanding the Challenge of Discipline**

- A. Defining Discipline
- B. The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment
- C. Agency Policy on Discipline
- D. The Negative Effects of Physical Punishment

#### **Part III: Effective Discipline**

- A. Knowledge, Skills, and Personal Qualities Essential for Instilling Effective Discipline
- B. The Meaning of Behavior
- C. The Range of Discipline Methods and Techniques
- D. Discipline Considerations for Children Who Have Been Abused and Neglected
- E. Managing Behavioral Crises
- F. Putting It All Together

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## Part IV: Closing Remarks

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- A. PRIDEbook Resources
- B. A Birth Parent's Perspective
- C. PRIDE Connection
- D. Preview of Session Seven
- E. Making a Difference!
- F. End Session

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## Goals of Effective Discipline

Foster PRIDE/  
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

The disciplinary process should be concerned with:

- Protecting and nurturing children's physical and psychological well-being.
- Advancing children's development.
- Meeting children's needs.
- Teaching ways to prevent and solve problems.
- Maintaining and building the parent/child relationship.
- Helping children develop self-control and responsibility.
- Producing the desired behavior.

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Resource 6-C

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**Reasons Why Discipline and Punishment  
Are Not the Same**

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**Resource 6-D**

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Punishment</b>
A. Something that parents instill in children.	A. Is imposed on children.
B. Can be used to prevent problems from happening.	B. Focuses on dealing with problems after they occur.
C. Builds self-control and self-responsibility.	C. Places responsibility for change with the person who has power to control the child's behavior.
D. Offers structure and guidance.	D. Imposes sanctions and enforcement.
E. Teaches the right way to solve or prevent problems.	E. Although it might stop the wrong behavior, it does not teach the right or expected behaviors.
F. Encourages children to be capable and responsible for making decisions.	F. Prevents children from learning to make their own decisions.
G. Encourages the desired behavior.	G. May reinforce unacceptable behavior if misbehaving is the only way to get parental attention.
H. Is intended to protect and nurture children.	H. Often uses, and may cause, emotional and physical pain.
I. May help children feel better about themselves as they grow confident of their ability to meet their needs responsibly.	I. May reinforce poor self-esteem, especially if the punishment was demeaning.
J. Encourages children to rely on their inner controls or rules for conduct.	J. Implies that responsible behavior is expected only when authority figures are present.
K. Promotes a cooperative, shared, positive relationship between children and adults.	K. Increases avoidance and fear.

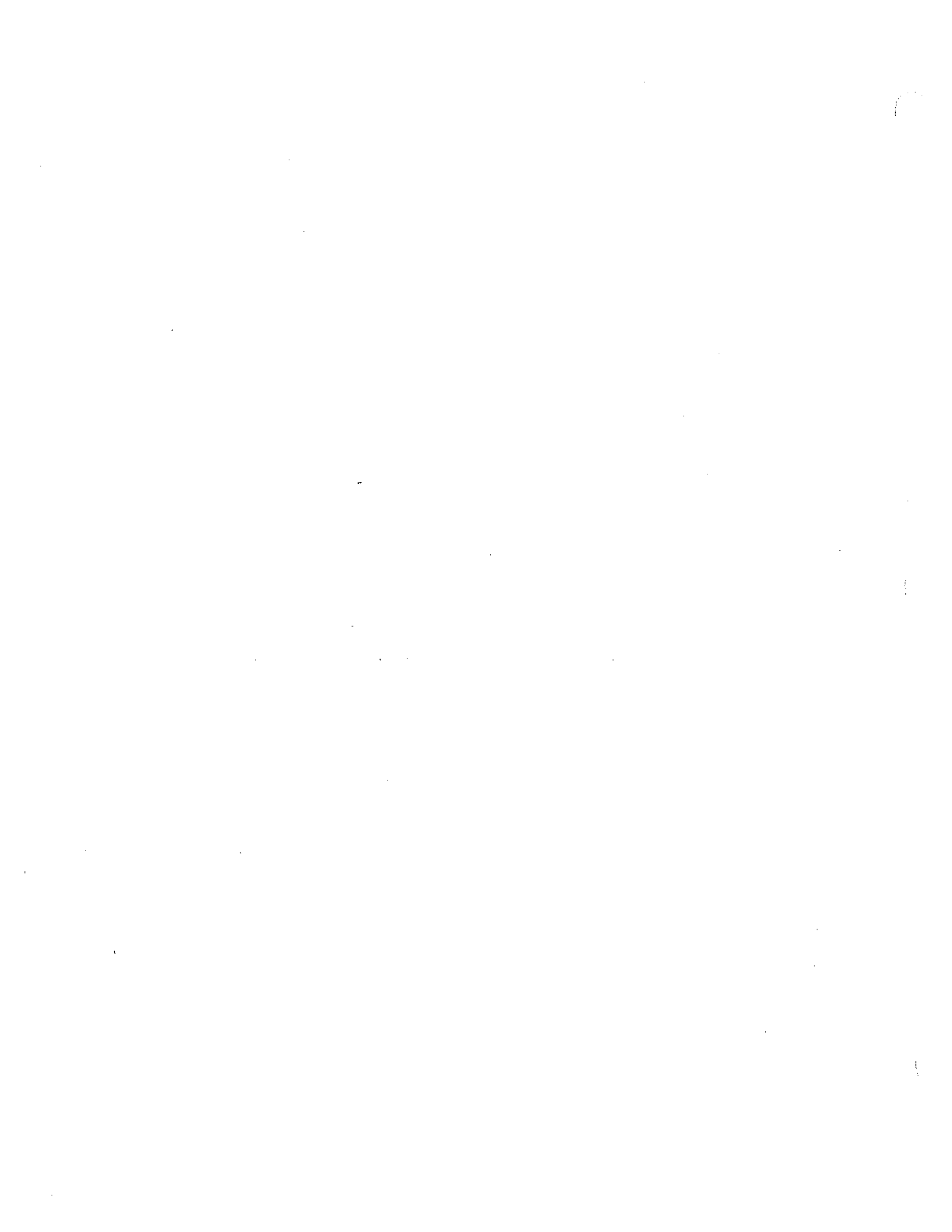
## **Agency Policy on Discipline**

The foster family must demonstrate the knowledge and use of the methods of discipline other than physical punishment. Family foster parent(s) shall establish well-defined rules, which establish the expectations and limits of behavior that are relevant to the child's level of growth and development, and which are applied in a consistent manner. Discipline should be positive rather than negative. Care should be taken to thoroughly explore how parent(s) were disciplined and methods of discipline used with their own children. The use of any form of physical punishment with a foster child is prohibited. Striking a child can result in physical harm as well as psychological damage to the foster child who may already have experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect, rejection, and separation from his birth/legal family. Care must be taken, in foster care, that further feelings of insecurity and unworthiness are not perpetuated.

Methods of discipline that are unacceptable for use by family foster parents with foster children include, but are not limited to:

- Cruel, severe, or humiliating actions such as washing mouth with soap, taping or obstructing child's mouth, placing painful or unpleasant-tasting substances in mouth, on lips, etc., placing child in dark areas; or any kind of humiliation in public;
- Physical punishment inflicted in any manner, such as hitting, pinching, pulling hair, slapping, kicking. Twisting arm, forcing fixed body positions, etc;
- Denial of meals, clothing, shelter, withholding implementation of the case plan, or any denial of basic rights;
- Denial of visits, telephone or mail contacts with family members;
- Assignment of extremely strenuous exercise or work
- Locked isolation of any kind; and
- Punishment of any kind for poor toilet habits.





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## Agency Policy on Discipline

(to be added by agency)

Foster PRIDE/  
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

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## Reasons Supporting the Agency's Policy on Discipline

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### Resource 6-F

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- Children who need family foster care and adoption have had serious losses: loss of people, health, and/or self-esteem.
- Most often, these losses result from neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse.
- Some children are emotionally scarred after years of physical punishment and abuse. The trauma from this abuse cannot be overcome quickly. More physical punishment does not help a child overcome the effects of past abuse.
- For some children who have experienced severe physical punishment, a spanking would do little to change the child's behavior. Imagine that a child was like Vernon in the film *Making a Difference!*—physically abused with beatings and cigarette burns. How effective would just a spanking be?
- Other forms of physical and emotional punishment (such as humiliation or withholding food) do not make much sense for children who already have been hurt badly enough that they need to be separated from their families.
- Many children who have received cruel and/or extreme punishments will not respond to punishment unless it is abusive or severe. Others will overreact to any form of punishment.
- A goal of family foster care is to give children a safe, nurturing environment where they can experience physical and emotional growth, and feelings of security and positive self-esteem. Physical punishment is a poor tool for providing these conditions.

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## The Negative Effects of Physical Punishment

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- It teaches children that bigger people use power and force to stop smaller people from doing certain things. One rarely sees someone small using physical punishment on someone larger. It increases the chances that older or bigger children will hit younger, smaller children.
- It teaches children that using force or violence is a way to solve problems and conflicts, and a way to respond when you are angry.
- It increases the likelihood that the person who is punished will grow resentful.
- It fuels poor self-esteem by not treating the child and the child's body with dignity and respect. Children do not always connect the event or the behavior that they are being punished for with the consequences. Instead, they may think that they're no good, and that others don't like them.
- Research in child development and psychology has shown that physical punishment may stop a behavior immediately, but not for long. It just means that a child might stop doing a particular behavior around the parent.
- Physical punishment tends to set the child against the parent who uses it. It is important to remember that painful feelings can cause more lasting hurt than physical pain.
- It teaches the importance of not getting caught. The child learns to hide his or her actions and becomes sneaky in the process.
- Physical punishment violates a child's right to be safe. If the same behavior was inflicted on an adult, the aggressor could be charged with assault.

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Resource 6-G

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## **Responding to Common Beliefs about Spanking**

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Prepare a response to the statement assigned to your group. You will have five minutes to discuss the reasons why it would be best to disagree with this statement. Select a person to report on your ideas.

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### **Resource 6-H**

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The following is an example of a response to one common belief about spanking or hitting:

#### **Statement**

“Spanking is okay because the kids need to know I’m in charge.”

#### **Possible response**

“Adults who have to use physical force and power to stop a child’s behavior are not in charge or in control.”

#### **Other Common Beliefs about Spanking**

- “I was spanked and I turned out okay.”
- “Some children just ask for it.”
- “You said to treat all children equally, and I spank my children.”
- “I don’t want my children to become spoiled. An occasional spanking is good for them.”
- “Spanking is all right if the parent remains calm and in control.”

# The Range of Disciplinary Techniques

## PROMOTING

### **PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIOR**

Seeks to strengthen relationship with child, build self-esteem, and promote child's ability and confidence to handle situations alone.

**Child  
maintains  
greatest  
responsibility  
for control  
of behavior.**

Communication  
Listening  
Questioning  
Modeling  
Praise  
Verbal  
Nonverbal  
Physical  
Sharing positive feelings  
Rewards  
Tangible privileges  
Increased responsibility  
Support interests  
Encouragement  
Ignoring

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### **Resource 6-I**

### **PROMOTING SELF-CONTROL**

Uses planning and preparation as a means to avoid acting-out and negative behaviors.

**Parent and  
child share  
responsibility  
for control  
of behavior.**

Encourage risk taking  
Establish expectations  
Rules  
Standards of behavior  
Family meetings  
Preparing/planning for changes  
Modifying the environment

### **RESPONDING TO LACK OF SELF-CONTROL**

Uses direct intervention to address situations where the child does not have sufficient self-control to ensure acceptable behavior.

**Parent  
maintains  
greatest  
responsibility  
for control  
of behavior.**

"I-messages"  
Natural and logical consequences  
Exploring alternatives  
Rules  
Commands or requests  
Removing child from situation  
Time-out

## RESPONDING

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## Factors Influencing Methods of Discipline

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All the methods we identified can be effective. However, we must consider several factors for their successful use:

- The behavior itself.
- Our feelings about the behavior.
- The child.
- The purpose we assign to the behavior.
- Where the behavior is occurring.
- Who is present in the setting.
- Our ability and willingness to respond effectively.
- Our relationship with the child.

**Resource 6-J**

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## **Strategies for Approaching Discipline with Children Who Have Experienced Trauma\***

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**Pay careful attention to communication in the discipline process.**

Children and youth who have been traumatized may have difficulty attending to conversation. They may, therefore, not hear or understand rules and expectations.

- Give directions or talk about rules using simple and easy to understand language. Use short sentences.
- Provide an explanation for rules such as “to make sure you are safe”. But don’t provide extensive explanations or reasons. Likewise for consequences.
- “Check-in” with the child to ensure he or she is listening and understanding what you are saying. Make sure the statement is received as you meant it.
- Be clear and direct.

**Listen promptly and carefully to what children and youth are saying, and do not minimize the child’s experience.**

Many crisis situations can be avoided if we attend to children’s needs and listen to what they are telling us. At home, it may be difficult to respond immediately to a need, but remember that children who have experienced trauma may have needs that escalate very quickly. It is reasonable to expect a child to wait until you have finished a telephone call, but these children may quickly lose their sense of control and the situation can spiral out of control. A child who has been neglected may immediately over-express his or her need.

- Respond to children’s needs as quickly as possible. Over time, a child’s reactions will escalate.
- Listen carefully to children’s responses. Don’t dismiss their concerns. Answer questions honestly.
- Avoid minimizing feelings (“There’s no need to be upset.”), avoiding or distracting (“Come on smile. It’s not that bad.”), and philosophizing (“In this world things aren’t going to go perfect.”) All of these diminish the child’s sense of reality and self. Indeed, the traumatized child may re-experience the trauma in even the most benign of situations.

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\* Adapted from Cotton, N.S. (1993). Lessons from the Lion’s Den. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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**Resource 6-K**

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**Be objective, non-judgmental, concise, consistent, and clear.**

Emotionally traumatized children and youth respond best to objective and clear guidelines. Make as few rules as possible, make it clear what is most important, and discuss and enforce rules consistently. This is a “no nonsense” approach. At least initially, rules are not made to be broken and a flexible approach only confuses the child.

For a child who has lived with chaos, the relief of knowing what to expect is healing. When children misbehave or hurt one another, you will certainly find yourself responding in an emotional way. But in the world of dealing with traumatized children you will need to put that anger somewhere else—in writing, vent it at a support group or to the worker, or go outside later and scream. An objective approach to the child or youth works best.

- Discuss and enforce rules in an objective and clear manner.
- Clarify the most important rules and consequences (especially around safety). Some families establish the **BIG RULE**: making sure “you don’t hurt yourself or others.” Don’t establish long lists of rules and complicated behavior management systems.
- Don’t bend the rules. You are trying to make a stable, predictable world for a child who has not had one. If you tend to feel sorry for a child or make allowances for bad behavior, you will undermine your efforts and increase the child’s anxiety by making the world unpredictable.
- Stay away from emotional or “relationship” strategies when children misbehave or fail to follow rules. (“How could you do this to me?” or “I’ve tried to be a good foster mother to you.”) This does not mean that effective “I-statements” are not useful. (“When you try to hit me it hurts. It makes me feel bad.”)
- Give yourself a “time-out”. A break will help you see things more objectively and respond less emotionally.
- Try your best to find other outlets to vent your emotions. Anger can frighten traumatized children or it may even please them. Even happiness may need to be tempered. A child may fear that he or she will not be able to continue to live up to your expectations.

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**Try at all times to relieve the child's anxiety.**

A symptom of post-trauma is the high degree of anxiety that an individual experiences. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a psychiatric diagnosis that is given to some children. This disorder is actually classified as one of the anxiety disorders within the field of psychiatry. While all children who experience trauma may not warrant this diagnosis, it is probably true that most experience some form of post-trauma anxiety. For this reason, it is important to think about ways to lower the child's anxiety on a day to day basis. Unfortunately, the very nature of discipline makes it stressful for children.

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- Select low stress times to talk about rules, expectations, and consequences. (Dinner time is generally not a low stress period.) Be sure there is plenty of time.
- Discuss and enforce discipline with a calm and soothing voice.
- Tell children that you will keep them safe and that they are able to follow the rules. Explain that there will be consequences for not following rules, but it will not result in your being angry, hurting them, or having them leave the home.
- During high stress times, try to ignore those behaviors that can be ignored.
- Provide a "safe space" for children to go where they are free to remove themselves from the everyday activities of the house. Have a favorite book there, and make sure it's in a spot where a watchful eye can oversee the child.

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## De-escalation Strategies and Skills

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#### **Preventative:**

- Know that change represents stress to a child. During periods of change, build extra structure into the child's routine and plan to spend additional one-on-one time with the child.
- Identify situations and times of day that are most stressful to the child. Use structure, activities, talking, or the use of "safe space" to assist the child.
- When the chaos of your home becomes overwhelming, use "safe space" and/or separate the child from the chaos.
- Be alert to signs that behavior among children is escalating. Separate children to calm the situation.
- Work to create a safe and calm environment in times of stress. Turn the television off. Play soothing music. Lower the lights. Speak in a calm and soothing voice.
- Assure children of their safety.

#### **De-escalating the Crisis:**

- Avoid a battle. This is a not a question of authority—it involves a situation with a child who is out of control of his or her emotions and behavior. Now is not the time to prove "who's in charge."
- Appear calm and controlled. When children sense that a caregiver is out of control, this escalates their anxiety and thus their behavior.
- Allow time and listen. Acknowledge the anger.
- Allow the child to have personal space. Do not move in quickly. Do not touch the child.
- Set limits calmly, firmly, and with an expectation that the child will obey.
- Ask the child what would help him or her to feel better.

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- When the child is yelling, try not to yell over him or her. Wait until there is a break.
  - Do not demand that the child make eye contact. Do not maintain eye contact with the child for long periods of time.
  - Try to negotiate easy ways for the child to save face.

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## Case Study: Danielle

In your small group, answer the question you have been assigned.

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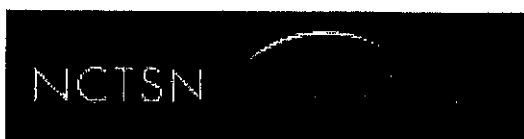
**Resource 6-M**

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Danielle, age six, witnessed many examples of domestic violence in her home over several years. She was separated from her mother after the mother's boyfriend shot her mother in the leg and her mother entered the hospital. Danielle has nightmares, tries to avoid being in the room with males, and often exhibits self-abusive behavior including biting her fingers and scratching her arms until they bleed. This usually occurs during the early evening hours while the foster parents are trying to get all the children ready for bed.

In addition, Danielle exhibits very irritating behaviors such as not cleaning up after herself, not making eye contact, and hitting other children. Danielle tells her foster mother constantly that she wants to go home to her mother. The foster home has a set of rules to which Danielle appears oblivious. The consequences for breaking the rules appear to have no effect on Danielle.

- What reasons explain why Danielle might be behaving in this manner?
- What behaviors are most critical to manage and would need to be addressed before others?
- What strategies might you use to keep Danielle safe if she began to bite her finger and scratch her arms?
- What behavior management techniques that we reviewed might be effective with Danielle and her range of behaviors, and how might they be used?
- What de-escalation or preventative strategies might you use to help avoid the self-abusive behavior?



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## **The Invisible Suitcase: Behavioral Challenges of Traumatized Children**

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### **Resource 6-N**

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Children who enter the foster care system typically arrive with at least a few personal belongings: clothes, toys, pictures, etc. But many also arrive with another piece of baggage, one that they are not even aware they have: an “invisible suitcase” filled with the beliefs they have about themselves, the people who care for them, and the world in general.

For children who have experienced trauma—particularly the abuse and neglect that leads to foster care—this invisible suitcase is often filled with overwhelming negative beliefs and expectations. Beliefs not only about themselves . . .

- I am worthless.
- I am always in danger of being hurt or overwhelmed.
- I am powerless.

But also about you as a caregiver . . .

- You are unresponsive.
- You are unreliable.
- You are, or will be, threatening, dangerous, rejecting.

You didn't create the invisible suitcase, and the beliefs inside aren't personally about you. But understanding its contents is critical to your helping your child to overcome the effects of trauma and establish healthy relationships.

### **The Invisible Suitcase and Behavior**

The negative beliefs and expectations that fill the invisible suitcase permeate every aspect of a child's life. Children who have been through trauma take their invisible suitcases with them to school, into the community, everywhere they go. They have learned through painful experience that it is not safe to trust or believe in others, and that it is best not to give relationships a chance.

As a result, children who have experienced trauma often exhibit extremely challenging behaviors and reactions that can be overwhelming for resource parents. These problems may include aggression, outbursts of anger, trouble sleeping, and difficulty concentrating. Very often, the behavior problems that are the most difficult to handle—those that may even threaten the child's placement in your home—come from the invisible suitcase and its impact on relationships. One way of understanding why this happens is the concept of **reenactment**.

Reenactment is the habit of recreating old relationships with new people. Reenactments are behaviors that evoke in caregivers some of the same reactions that traumatized children experienced with other adults, and so lead to

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familiar—albeit negative—interactions. Just as traumatized children's sense of themselves and others is often negative and hopeless, their reenactment behaviors can cause the new adults in their lives to feel negative and hopeless about the child.

### Why do children reenact?

Children who engage in reenactments are not consciously choosing to repeat painful or negative relationships. The behavior patterns children exhibit during reenactments have become ingrained over time because they:

- Are familiar and helped the child survive in other relationships.
- “Prove” the negative beliefs in the invisible suitcase, by provoking the same reactions the child experienced in the past. (A predictable world, even if negative, may feel safer than an unpredictable one.)
- Help the child vent frustration, anger, and anxiety.
- Give the child a sense of mastery over the old traumas.

Many of the behaviors that are most challenging for resource parents are strategies that in the past may have helped the child survive in the presence of abusive or neglectful caregivers. Unfortunately, these once-useful strategies can undermine the development of healthy relationships with new people and only reinforce the negative messages contained in the invisible suitcase.

### What Resource Parents Can Do

#### Remember the Suitcase

Keep in mind that the children placed in your home are likely to re-use the strategies they learned in situations of abuse and neglect. Because of their negative beliefs, children with an invisible suitcase have learned to elicit adult involvement through acting out and problem behavior. These behaviors may evoke intense emotions in you, and you may feel pushed in ways you never expected. Some common reactions in resource parents include:

- Urges to reject the child.
- Abusive impulses towards the child.
- Emotional withdrawal and depression.
- Feelings of incompetence/helplessness.
- Feeling like a bad parent.

This can lead to a vicious cycle in which the child requires more and more of your attention and involvement, but the relationship is increasingly strained by the frustration and anger both you and the child now feel. If left unchecked, this cycle can lead to still more negative interactions, damaged relationships, and confirmation of all the child's negative beliefs about him/herself and others. In some cases, placements are ended. And the suitcase just gets heavier.

#### Provide Disconfirming Experiences

Preventing the vicious cycle of negative interactions requires patience and self-awareness. Most of all, it requires a concerted effort to respond to the child in

ways that challenge the invisible suitcase and provide the child with new, positive messages. Messages that tell the child:

- You are worthwhile and wanted.
- You are safe.
- You are capable.

And messages that say you, as a caregiver

- Are available and won't reject him/her.
- Are responsive and won't abuse him/her.
- Will protect him from danger.
- Will listen and understand him/her.

This does not mean giving children a free pass on their negative behaviors. As a parent, you must still hold children accountable, give consequences, and set expectations. But with the invisible suitcase in mind, you balance correction with praise, and deliver consequences without the negative emotions that may be triggered by the child's reenactments.

- Praise even the simplest positive or neutral behaviors. Provide at least 6 instances of warm, sincere praise for each instance of correction.
- Stay calm and dispassionate when correcting the child. Use as few words as possible and use a soft, matter-of-fact tone of voice.
- Be aware of your own emotional response to the child's behavior. If you cannot respond in a calm, unemotional fashion, step away until you can.
- Don't be afraid to repeat corrections (and praise) as needed. Learning new strategies and beliefs takes time.

### Establish a Dialog

The strategies that maltreated children develop to get their needs met may be brilliant and creative, but too often are personally costly. They need to learn that there is a better way. Children need to learn that they can talk about the underlying feelings and beliefs contained in their invisible suitcase. They need to understand that you as the caregiver can tolerate these expressions without the common reactions they have come to expect from adults: rejection, abuse, abandonment. Help children learn words to describe their emotions and feelings and encourage them to express those feelings. When the contents of the invisible suitcase have been unpacked and examined, reenactments and negative cycles are less likely to occur.

**For more information on helping foster children who have been through trauma, see:**

Delaney, Richard. (1998) *Fostering Changes: Treating Attachment-Disordered Foster Children*. 2nd Edition, Oklahoma City, OK: Wood 'N' Barnes Publishing.

Kagan, Richard. (2004) *Rebuilding Attachments with Traumatized Children*. New York: Haworth Press.



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## Caring for the Caregiver: Tips for Avoiding Compassion Fatigue

Caring for traumatized children and adolescents can take quite a toll on resource parents. Remember that paying attention to your own feelings and needs is just as important as attending to the needs of your child. Without proper self-care, you can become physically, mentally, and emotionally worn out—as if you are carrying the child’s traumas all on your own shoulders. Some people call this “compassion fatigue.” When this happens, you may experience:

- Increased irritability or impatience with the child
- Denial of the impact traumatic events have had on the child
- Feelings of numbness or detachment
- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts about the child’s past traumas that don’t lessen over time
- Dreams about the child’s traumas
- The desire to get away from the child or get the child out of your home

If you experience any of these signs for more than two to three weeks, seek counseling with a professional who is knowledgeable about trauma. To avoid compassion fatigue, take the following pre-emptive steps.

- **Beware of isolation.** Successful resource parents know that they cannot go it alone when caring for children with trauma. Work in a team, talk to other foster parents and therapists, and ask for support.
- **Accept your reactions.** All too often, resource parents judge themselves as weak or incompetent for having strong reactions to a child’s trauma. These feelings are not a sign of weakness or incompetence; rather, they can be the cost of caring.
- **Work on understanding and processing your own traumas.** Adults with a history of unresolved traumatic experiences are more at risk for compassion fatigue. Seek help to make sure your own traumatic history and reactions to trauma reminders don’t get in the way of your being an effective parent.
- **Keep your perspective.** Remember, you are not just a resource parent. Make time to interact with children and adolescents who have not been maltreated, to socialize with adult friends, and to find joy in every day. Be sure to laugh often.

For more information on the impact of trauma on children, visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org).

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## **Key Points**

### **Discipline Is a Challenge**

- Sometimes foster parents and adoptive parents can feel that others (family, friends, the community, the agency) have expectations of them that are higher than they can meet.
- Children placed with foster parents or adoptive parents have experienced traumas and inconsistencies in their young lives, so understanding rules and expectations is difficult for them.
- Children placed with foster families or adoptive families experience a loss of control, anger, sadness, and other emotions that can result in extreme behaviors.
- Instilling discipline and encouraging responsible behavior in children is complicated by their diverse and special needs.
- When children are first placed, there is an urgency to get to know and establish a trusting relationship with them. This can be difficult to accomplish when foster parents and adoptive parents must use disciplinary techniques during this period in order to respond to children's unacceptable behavior.
- Incorporating a new child or children into your family and household requires extra planning for change.

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### **What Is Discipline?**

The word discipline comes from the Latin root *discere*, which means to learn, and from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means pupil. A disciplinarian is, therefore, someone who teaches. A disciplined person is someone who has learned.

The foster parent or adoptive parent who is a disciplinarian is a teacher and a guide who helps children learn.

Through discipline, which is an educational process, we strive to have children learn what we are teaching. As disciplinarians we want children to grow and develop based on what they learn. As they learn ways to meet their developmental needs appropriately and responsibly, their growth proceeds accordingly.

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Discipline is intended to help a child develop self-control, self-respect, responsibility, and orderliness. A disciplined person is one who has learned self-control, and who is governed by a system of rules within himself or herself.

Discipline is orderly, in that it helps children to deal with themselves and others, and with society in a logical way. Order has rules, with predictable consequences for breaking the rules.

Discipline is not just something we do in response to an unacceptable behavior or situation. Discipline is preventive and future-oriented. Discipline helps children redirect an unacceptable impulse, so their behavior will be appropriate as defined by their culture and society.

As part of a system of discipline, adults use techniques that focus on what they want the child to do the next time the child finds himself or herself in a similar situation.

Discipline is also intended to protect the child's physical and psychological well-being, and to protect others and the environment. Discipline protects the child's physical well-being by teaching the child how to meet his or her needs safely, effectively, efficiently, and responsibly.

Successful discipline protects and develops the child's self-concept, beliefs the child has about being worthy and capable. A healthy self-concept produces a child who is self-disciplining.

### **Responding to Common Beliefs about Spanking**

"I was spanked and I turned out okay."

Many of us were spanked or otherwise physically punished, and we did turn out okay. That's because while our parents were using that form of punishment, they probably did things that made us feel good about ourselves, and helped us problem solve. In other words, they were not physically punishing us all the time.

"Some children just ask for it."

Children who experience neglect and maltreatment may learn that the only way to get attention is to disobey and behave inappropriately. Some children may not know they are behaving inappropriately. A child who expects or wants to be physically hurt is a child with some emotional problems. Physical punishment won't help, and will make the problem worse.

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"You said treat all children equally, and I spank my children."

Treating all children equally means treating all fairly, and with dignity and respect. Parents don't deal with their teenagers the same way they deal with preschoolers; there are different expectations.

A physical punishment given to a child who has had a loving, nurturing, caring background differs greatly from that same punishment given to a child who has been abused physically, sexually, and/or emotionally.

Furthermore, experienced foster parents have reported that their children would be confused by the "double standard" involved in spanking some children (their birth children) and not others (children in need of family foster care). In fact, because of this confusion and an increased awareness of other negative effects of spanking, many foster parents refrain from using this type of punishment completely.

"I don't want my children to become spoiled. An occasional spanking is good for them."

Children become "spoiled" through inconsistent parenting, a lack of structure, and no clear expectations for how they will act, rather than from spanking. Understanding and meeting children's needs is the best way to prevent them from becoming self-centered or spoiled.

Saying that spanking is "good" for them makes it sound as if there is a benefit for children to realize through this action. Being hit doesn't feel good at the time it happens, nor does it produce a long term benefit.

"Spanking is all right if the parent remains calm and in control of himself or herself."

If a parent is calm and not angry, he or she should be able to manage a child's behavior more effectively than spanking. Using spanking to relieve parental frustration or to diffuse parental anger serves the parent and has no positive benefit for the child.

Being aware that spanking may become harmful to a child should lead a parent to doubt the value of spanking any time.

"Spanking shows children you love them."

Hitting children who have been abused does not show them love. They had too many experiences with people who told them they loved them, and then physically or sexually abused them.

Spanking shows anger, not love. Expressions from parents such as, "I'm doing this for your own good and because I love you so much," or, "It hurts me more than it hurts you," confuse children by sending them mixed messages.

"A misbehaving child needs to know I'm really mad."

As discussed in Session Four, anger is a secondary emotion. It follows loss, and usually loss of self-esteem. Children who misbehave need to know that the behavior was hurtful to someone else.

"The kids need to know I'm in charge."

Adults who have to resort to physical force and power to stop the behavior of children are not in charge or in control.

### **Knowledge, Skills, and Personal Qualities Essential for Instilling Discipline**

- Patience
- Determination
- Confidence
- Genuineness and Concern
- Openness
- Separateness
- Friendly Firmness
- Effective Communication
- Understanding Child and Adolescent Development, and the Factors that Affect Development
- Understanding the Goals of Effective Discipline
- Communication Skills
- Understanding of the Meaning of Behavior

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## The Meaning of Behavior

Most often, discipline seeks to correct or change unwanted or unacceptable behavior. To effectively change a behavior, we must try to determine the meaning or purpose of the behavior. Understanding the meaning of behavior is the first step toward dealing with it.

Too often, we react to the behavior without recognizing that there is a purpose behind it. The worse a behavior might be, the more we will react to it, while ignoring the underlying motive for it. When all our energy is spent trying to control or change a behavior, the child will use other behaviors to meet his or her needs.

What works better is to focus not only on the behavior itself, but also on identifying the needs that motivate the behavior. Then we will be much more capable of providing the structure and parenting that can help children act appropriately. This, after all, is a primary goal of effective discipline.

### Needs That Motivate Behavior

Needs that motivate behavior include more than the basic survival needs of food, clothing, shelter, and safety.

We strive to be connected to others to satisfy our need to **BELONG**. We do things to receive **RECOGNITION** or attention. We have a strong need for **POWER** or to control our environment. We pursue activities which will meet our need for **ENJOYMENT**. And, we have a need for **FREEDOM**, which is met when we have choices and practice our values.\*

Children may also behave in certain ways because of their culture and life experiences. It is important not to interpret these actions as misbehavior (such as drinking from a bowl at the dinner table).

It is important to approach behavior issues from a teamwork perspective. The agency, birth parents, and previous caregivers may have valuable information about what works or does not work. When the plan is for the child to return home it is critical that “shared parenting” efforts focus on a unified approach to discipline—foster parents and birth parents need to work together!

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\* Glasser W. Control Theory: (1985). A New Explanation of How We Control Our Lives. New York: Harper & Row, 5-18.

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## The Range of Discipline Methods and Techniques

Discipline may be challenging, but there are a number of discipline approaches, techniques, and methods available for our use.

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There are three major categories of techniques, and it may be helpful to think of these as a continuum of responses.

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- **Promoting Positive Behavior**

These responses focus on relationship building and promoting positive self-esteem. Examples of promoting positive behavior include listening to children, asking questions, providing encouragement, modeling, praising desired behavior, and rewarding appropriate behavior. When these techniques are used, children are allowed to take control and responsibility for their own behavior. As the disciplinarian, you are not taking control of the child's behavior. Sometimes this is called "proactive" discipline.

- **Promoting Self-Control**

This category uses planning and preparation as a means to avoid negative behaviors. Examples of techniques that promote self-control include setting rules, stating expectations for children, developing schedules and routines for getting tasks done, preparing children for stressful situations, and modifying the environment.

- **Responding to Lack of Control**

The caregiver uses direct intervention to deal with behaviors. This is the category most often associated with discipline. Examples of techniques that can be used to respond to a lack of self-control include establishing consequences for behavior, exploring alternatives, making commands or requests to modify behavior, removing the child from the situation, and time out.

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## **Discipline Considerations for Children Who Have Been Abused and Neglected**

Foster PRIDE/  
Adopt PRIDE

PRIDEbook

Children within the child welfare system have often experienced abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional maltreatment. They may have witnessed all types of violence, including domestic violence and street and community violence. Increasingly the field is recognizing the impact of this trauma on the child. For instance, a child who has been neglected may develop extreme behaviors in order to ensure that his or her needs are met. This child may not be able to ask politely for something, but instead may immediately throw a temper tantrum. Youth who have been sexually abused may cope by hoarding food, hiding it in their room, and constantly eating. Children who have been separated over and over from family and foster families may cope by detaching from caretakers. Expecting these children to exhibit good behavior because of a positive relationship with you is unrealistic.

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These behaviors and coping strategies have an impact on those who are close to or providing care for the child—especially when it comes to discipline.

The foster parent cannot rely heavily on his or her relationship with the child when approaching behavior management. With our own children we often expect them to behave in a certain way in part based on the fact that they love and respect us. We may expect our own children to listen to us, believe us, and follow our rules because they know we love them. In fact, this is such an inherent part of most family discipline that we don't even think about it. But it is highly unlikely that this will be effective with a child who has attachment problems.

Over time, foster families who depend heavily on the relationship may become discouraged. A telling sign is when these families relate "We couldn't believe he did this to us." While misbehavior of our own children may represent an affront to the relationship, it is best not to think about the behavior of children in family foster care in these terms. Much misbehavior is a result of coping strategies to deal with past trauma and separation. While this does not excuse the behavior, it does explain why the behavior should not be seen as an indicator of the child's relationship with you.



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## Managing Behavioral Crises

Children and youth may be at greater risk in the following situations:

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- When experiencing significant changes and multiple losses.
- When experiencing conflict around sexual identity (including gay or lesbian youth who are experiencing conflict over “coming out” or who are in fear of being “found out”).
- When there is current or past abuse of substances.
- When there have been previous suicide attempts or a history of high risk behaviors (such as prostitution, running away, driving fast, cutting or mutilating oneself, drug and/or alcohol overdoses).
- When there has been a serious mental health diagnosis such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, or anorexia.

It would be naïve to think that our work with children who have experienced trauma will always be effective in dealing with problem behaviors. There may be times when behaviors are so serious or dangerous that outside help or intervention by specially trained personnel is required.

If you recognize extreme behavior problems or potentially unsafe or dangerous behaviors, it is important for you to share your observations with the worker and request a special evaluation.

In very rare circumstances, it may be necessary to summon outside help immediately in order to protect the child, yourself, and your family.

In the following situations, you should request outside help immediately:

- The child has exhibited suicidal gestures or self mutilation.
- The child damages property that puts himself, herself, or others in physical danger.
- The child physically assaults others.
- The child runs away from home.

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## You Need to Know!

Foster PRIDE/  
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### **Fostering or Adopting Children with Extreme or Unusual Behaviors**

Sometimes the traumas that children have suffered result in emotional and behavioral disorders. Other behavior disorders, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, tend to run in families or result from environmental factors. Many children from families with severe problems have emotional or behavioral problems.

Most of us have emotional reactions to stressful situations. So it is difficult to define exactly when normal behavior crosses the line to behavioral or emotional disorders. One way to recognize signs of emotional or behavioral disturbance is to think of a reaction that is exaggerated, prolonged, or consistently inappropriate for the situation or stage of development.

For example:

- It is appropriate to get angry (lose self-esteem) when someone calls you a name, but plotting to seriously hurt someone because of an insult is not.
- It is not unusual for two-year-olds to throw themselves on the floor in a temper tantrum, but it would be unusual for teenagers to behave in the same way.
- It is normal to panic and flee from a fire, but not from a working elevator.
- It is appropriate to cry at a funeral, but not to break out crying every day in school for a year.
- It is usual for babies to wet the bed (that's why we have diapers), but not for teenagers (unless there is a medical problem).
- It is not unusual for us to talk to ourselves on occasion, but it is unusual for us to hear voices talking to us . . . and especially to act on the direction of those voices.

### **The Difference between Emotional Disturbance and Mental Retardation**

Mental retardation means that one's capacity to learn and process information is limited because of damage to the brain. Individuals who are mentally retarded are not necessarily emotionally disturbed.

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## **The Challenges**

Foster parents and adoptive parents face a great challenge as they seek to understand and work with children whose history may be largely unknown.

It is difficult at times to know what is just normal adolescent behavior and what signals a real problem.

Children may react to situations with strong feelings and inappropriate behaviors because:

- They have learned these behaviors from previous life experiences.
- They are developmentally delayed.
- They are developmentally disabled and cannot understand directions and consequences.
- They are grieving.
- They have real fears because of earlier traumatic experiences, and are protecting themselves.

## **The Need for Teamwork**

Foster parents and adoptive parents are responsible for helping children deal with these experiences. You must teach them more appropriate ways to cope and behave. To do this, you may need professional help.

This does not mean that you are inadequate as parents or that the child is mentally ill. If a child breaks a leg, you would seek medical help. When a fever persists, you visit a physician to find out if it is something serious.

Similarly, when a child or youth shows signs of behavioral problems, it is essential to seek professional help. An appropriate diagnosis will determine if the child needs continued help, or what the family can do to handle stressful situations that arise.

If a child placed with you has an emotional disorder, this does not mean you lack parenting skills. Getting help indicates concerned parenting, and shows responsibility, not inadequacy.

As a prospective foster parent or adoptive parent, you need to work carefully with the Family Development Specialist to identify your strengths related to these situations, and the supports you might need. As a foster parent, or as an adoptive parent before finalization, you need to work closely with the child's social worker and other team members regarding how to assess and manage the child's behavior.

As an adoptive parent after finalization, you should call the agency for information and assistance, if there is a problem.

### **How the Agency Can Help**

The agency can help you understand the difference between behaviors that just require appropriate discipline, and behaviors that require professional therapeutic intervention by:

- Providing as much information as possible about the child's history, because foster parents and adoptive parents respect confidentiality.
- Providing opportunities to get information from parents, previous foster parents, and adoptive parents as available.
- Helping develop behavior change plans.
- Making referrals for special counseling.
- Giving encouragement, ideas, and support.

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## A Birth Parent's Perspective "All I Ever Wanted Was to Be in Control of My Life"

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### Resource 6-Q

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I can tell my story. But it is not a pretty one. I will not tell you how my worker has helped me, how my children are better off in foster care, or how I am getting better as I go through this. I guess I am bitter. They think I am resistant and angry. The worker told me so. For once I agreed with her. The problem I think is of losing control of life. Like you can feel it slipping away from you and you don't know how to make it stop. It is worse for me because I made promises to myself. What no one seems to understand is that I never wanted my life to be like this. And yet it seems I have followed some path that has led me to where I never wanted to go.

I grew up in foster care. My mother was crazy. I think she tried to take care of us. They say we were beaten and neglected. I think of what I must have been like when I was five years old. My mom called me her pretty baby. No one called me pretty again.

I went through twelve foster homes by the time I was 15 years old and ran away. I had trouble in my foster homes. I always felt like they were trying to control me, make me something I wasn't, do things I didn't want to do. In some homes I tried to make the family happy. When I was real little I remember thinking that if I pretended hard enough maybe it could be real. But it was never real. As I got older, I wanted to be the first to prove that it wasn't real. All the families had different rules, different punishments, and different expectations of me. It was like a game trying to figure it out. It was always worse when you first went to a home. You could get yelled at before you had a clue about what they wanted. All I ever wanted was to be in control of my life.

Of course I made promises that my child would never be in foster care. That I would be the perfect mother. And yet it all got away from me so fast. I ran away from my foster home because I got pregnant by my foster mother's neighbor. I couldn't face her about what I had done. I lived on the streets and I wanted to die. The baby did. I wished the baby dead and then she died. I had no way to support myself. I became a working girl. If you don't know what that means, just think about it for a while. I was 16 years old.

I met a guy, Lenny, who tried to help me. He was clean and saw something good in me. We had a little girl Deena and then Sandy. I am not sure what happened. We just couldn't handle the kids. They cried all the time, ran around wild. We fought a lot about what to do. Lenny started using again. And he was always holding it up to me—you know—that he found me working the streets. Then he would say he didn't believe the girls really belonged to him. He would hit them. I was afraid to do anything. The first worker came out after Lenny beat Sandy with a belt. I tried my best to take control of my life. I threw Lenny out because they told me it was the only way I was going to keep my girls. But without Lenny I was no good. I had nothing. I felt everything starting to slip away. I let Lenny come back. No one understands that. But without him, I'm just not anybody—it's like I'm dead or something.

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## **PRIDE Connection**

# **Experiences with Discipline**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Family Development Specialist: \_\_\_\_\_

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Using appropriate and effective discipline is one of the most important responsibilities for foster parents and adoptive parents.

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### **Resource 6-R**

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How you experienced discipline in your own childhood and your experiences with discipline as an adult and/or as a parent, helps to give some ideas about how you will discipline children who are placed with you.

### **Your Childhood and Discipline**

Think back to your childhood and adolescence.

- How did you learn appropriate ways to get what you wanted?
  
- How did you learn not to hurt others, or not to hurt property?
  
- How did the way you were disciplined make you feel about yourself?  
Describe both the negative and positive feelings you experienced.

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## **Experiences with Discipline as an Adult or Parent**

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- How do you discipline children now?

- What methods of discipline do you feel most comfortable with?

- What methods of discipline are you uncomfortable with?

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## Making a Difference!

[Foster children] may not be with you very long, but you may be the only positive male role model they'll ever have in their life. Surprisingly, it doesn't take a long, extended amount of time for the benefits of being a positive role model to have an impact on a child.

I don't see as much involvement from foster fathers as I would like. Fathers and husbands tend to talk about [foster parenting] like "It's my wife's thing." They see themselves in a very passive role. . . . When I see couples, I don't see real active involvement from the men.

Foster fathers are the male role models for the kids in their household. For girls, it is a role model that they're going to use and hopefully benefit from when they start dating, and start relating to boys and men. For boys, obviously, it's the role model that they're going to look at when they become a man, in terms of how they're going to relate to women and to other men.

Our foster son has a longtime friend, and the other boy's mother told me, "I always know if my son is going to do something with your son; I can feel comfortable because your son is a good example, and he doesn't get into trouble like some of the other kids in the neighborhood." She saw my foster son as a positive role model for her own son.

. . . When you know about the background of my foster son, the fact that he was a role model for anyone was a real accomplishment. It's something I take a lot of pride in. This child has a great chance of being a successful adult.

Duane St. Clair\*  
President  
Maryland League of Foster and Adoptive Parents

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**Resource 6-S**

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\* Taken from "The Down to Earth Dad," by Patrick Mitchell. Children's Voice, May 2002 (Vol. 11, No. 3).

For more information, contact Patrick Mitchell at: Down to Earth Dad  
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