

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Creative Parenting Strategies for Traumatized Children

Reviewed May 2023

5.0 Training Credits

This self-study course draws on the information and strategies from the following materials:

Chase, Betty M. (1995) **Discipline Them, Love Them**, David C. Cook Church Ministries - Resources

Cutter, Deborah, Psy.D, Jaffee, Jaelline, Ph.D, Segal, Jeanne Ph.D, (2008). Article retrieved from Helpguide.org, February 08. **Self Injury; Types, Causes and Treatment**

Hage, Deborah, M.S.W. **Effectively Using Consequences**, Deborah Hage, M.S.W, Taped Presentation for the AK Attachment and Bonding Association

Keck, Gregory C., Kupecky, Regina. (1995) **Adopting the Hurt Child Hope for Families with Special –Needs Kids**. Pinon Press

Keck, Gregory C., (2000) **Preparing for the Teen Years**, Audio Presentation at the 2000 Nacac Conference.

McNamara, Joan and Bernard, (1990) **Adoption and the Sexually Abused Child**, Joan and Bernard McNamara, Human Services Development Institute, University of Southern Maine

Purvis, Karyn, (2007) **The Connected Child**, McGraw Hill Publishing

Steelsmith, Shari, (2000) **Go to Your Room! Consequences that Teach**, Raefield-Roberts Publishers

This self-study course was developed by Brenda Ursel, M.S. and Tammy Keech, Family Support Specialists and with assistance from Aileen McInnis and Linden Staciokas of the Alaska Center for Resource Families.



Alaska Center for Resource Families
815 Second Avenue, Suite 202
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

1-800-478-7307 / www.acrf.org

Resource Parent Competencies:

- Will look at challenging behaviors in the context of the how the behavior helped the child survive the traumatic events in his or her life.
- Will learn how to give the child lesser control in order to maintain overall control through structuring, clear, expectations and providing choices.
- Will learn the keys to successful interventions to help youth “put off” old behaviors and “put on” healthy productive ones.



PART ONE:

Creative Parenting Strategies for Traumatized Children Understanding the Basics of Difficult Behavior

Survival is a Strong Teacher

Let's start with three questions:

1. If you were helpless and totally dependent on the protection and provision of others who did not care for you, but often hurt you, what would you do to survive?
2. If you did survive, how quickly would you be willing to give up the skills that kept you alive?
3. How much abuse, how many broken promises and "disrupted placements" would it take before you concluded that people cannot be trusted?

Resilience vs. Survival

"Resilient children are made, not born"

"As we walked into the house where the victim's blood still soaked the couch and splattered the walls, I saw three young children standing like zombies in the corner. "What about the children?" I asked, as I nodded my head toward the three blood speckled witnesses. He glanced at them, thought for a moment, and then replied, 'Children are resilient. They will be fine.'"

-Excerpt from *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, Perry and Szalavitz, 2006.

The Resilient Child vs. The Surviving Child

The time between birth and five years old has been referred to as "The Critical Years." (Durrell, 1984) It is these early years when a child's brain is most sensitive and affected by experiences, good and bad. It is during this time that resiliency can be created in a child through the repetitious cycle of nurturing, predictable experiences. Unfortunately, it is also during these early years that the child's brain can be transformed by traumatic experiences such as ongoing abuse, neglect, terror and a chaotic environment. In these situations, often the only predictable factor in the life is the failure of adults to care for, protect or help him. (Keck and Kupecky 1995)

Just as consistent, nurturing experiences lay a solid, healthy foundation for a child to grow from, a child who has had prolonged exposure to traumatic events lacks the solid foundation of positive early experiences. This deficit can greatly impact his ability to attach, trust others and receive love, protection and provision from safe adults.

Hope and Healing Through Purposeful Parenting

Fortunately, the story does not end there. Hope and healing are possible and it starts with you, the parent! Resource parents need to think about the challenging behavior in the context of how it helped their child survive and for how long. Remember that any behavior that has been foundational in that child's life is not going to be given up without some resistance. Challenging behavior serves a purpose in helping the child get his/her needs met. (Perry and Szalavitz 2006.)

Early traumatic experiences teach children that the world is an unsafe, painful place and people are not a source of help, comfort or security. Children in this situation will learn to do whatever it takes to survive. They may physically and emotionally withdraw from the situation or they may lie, manipulate, use aggression, manipulation or threats to get their needs met.

The younger a child learns a coping strategy and the longer they need to use it, the more resistant they will be to change.

Your Child's Behavior Begins with "YOU"

- **Evaluate your expectations**
- **Keep your sense of humor**
- **Manage your stress level**
- **Expect resistance**
- **Model self control**
- **Keep your perspective**
- **Don't personalize behavior**

Young children cannot force adults to care and protect them. They have to learn ways to protect and provide for their own needs. How do they do that? Some children become self-reliant and aloof, refusing to ask anyone for anything. Other children challenge authority, intent on taking what they need when they need it. Lying, running away, threatening, violence, stealing, manipulating or emotional numbing are other ways children try to create a sense of control in their often out of control lives. Abused children may even resort to urinating and defecating on themselves to protect against abuse.

Much to the frustration of resource parents, these survival skills often persevere long after the threat is gone and the child is safe with a predictable supportive family. Therapeutic parenting expert Deborah Hage believes it takes approximately one month of effective interventions for every year of age. Changing these behaviors will take time, perseverance and patience. The child will challenge your authority test the boundaries and your commitment to him or her. These children will try everything in their power to prove you are no different than the adults who hurt and betrayed them, thus confirming their fundamental belief that adults cannot be trusted. Therein lies the challenge.

The Challenge

The challenge for parents is to move the child out of “survival mode” to a place of surrender to the care, provision and safety of your family. Through this experience the child can learn that good, trustworthy people exist in the world.

Children are not going to surrender to your care unless they trust you and they won't trust you until they know you and have tested you. As parents, you have to show the child in a calm, direct but gentle manner that you will not be intimidated and you are willing and capable to care, protect, provide and love them, no matter what. In order to do this, you must maintain emotional self-control at all times. “Losing it” means you have just confirmed everything that child believes about adults and the world. Often parents will report that when they lose their temper with the child, the child gets a look of great satisfaction. Eliciting anger from adults is what is familiar to the children and they get a sense of power from making you angry and creating chaos in the home. Anger and chaos is what they are familiar with and they will go to great lengths to re-create the chaos from which they came. This is why it is essential that parents know what sets them off, take care of themselves and get support when they need it.

Non Negotiable

- *Modest Dress*
- *Respectful to others*
- *Use Self Control*
- *Good Hygiene*
- *Homework before t.v. or video games*
- *Respectful of property*
- *Honesty*
- *Gentleness*
- *No movies over PG-13 Rating*
- *No gang related clothing*
- *No obscene, violent musical lyrics*

This will be different for all families

Abused and neglected children have felt helpless and powerless most of their lives and they want to be in control. Many of the most difficult behaviors have their roots in fear and feelings of being helpless and at the mercy of others. Remember fear drives control. The more effectively you can give your children a healthy sense of control, grounded in safety and security, the healthier they become.

Who's got the Power?

One of the principles of great horsemanship is letting go of lesser

Negotiable

- *Hair Styles*
- *Style and color of clothing*
- *Room Decorations*
- *Meal Planning*
- *What privilege they want to earn*
- *Movie Choices*
- *Playtime activities*
- *Extracurricular activities*
- *Music preference*
- *What chores they do*
- *Whether or not to hug others*
- *What park to play at*
- *Where do they want to shop?*
- *Type of desserts*

control to maintain overall control. Coincidentally, this principle is also effective with traumatized children. Parents need to identify the non-negotiable in their home and know when to dig in their heels and when to loosen the reins. Provide flexibility and choices within a structure. Allow children the freedom to experience the consequences of their decisions and take ownership of their behavior, for better or worse. Give them some control in their life and increase it as they demonstrate their ability to handle it.

Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. Giving the child too much too soon can be devastating and sets him up for failure. In traumatized children, the ability to think through choices, understand cause and effect and accept responsibility has not been fully developed. A child learns these skills, through age appropriate experience and practice. Never give a child more than two choices initially as more will be overwhelming.

When the child has been responsible with a few things, add a few more. If he cannot handle his current level of responsibility, rein him in until he is successful, and then move forward again.

Before You Implement- DOCUMENT!

It is critical for foster parents to be clearly communicating their parenting strategies with their social worker, licensing worker or therapist for feedback and direction. This is for your protection as well as the child's protection. Keep a journal of the child's behavior, your intervention and his response. Ask for feedback from your team. If there is a question, talk to your OCS worker. Maintain open, honest communication (i.e. emails, team meetings) about what is happening in your home. Effective documentation can protect you against misunderstandings, conflicts and possible accusations. As we have discussed, many of the most

The Five Keys to Successful Strategies

- Emotional Control
- No Fear
- Open Communication with team
- Documentation
- Done in a spirit of gentleness
- Say what you mean, mean what you say.

challenging behaviors of our children are rooted in the hurts and trauma of the past. The goal of this self-study is to provide parents with some creative strategies to help kids replace their old unhealthy patterns with new, healthy ones.

The key to these strategies rests in how they are implemented. Parents must be very aware of their triggers, fatigue and stress level. None of these interventions are to be used in a demeaning, sarcastic manner that degrades or humiliates a child. Any discipline administered in such a manner is in violation of foster parent regulations and is going to make the situation worse for everyone.

Won't or Can't?

That is the question. Before we can ask a child to change we have to look at ourselves. We need to make sure our expectations meet what the child can and can't do. Children would rather be viewed as bad than stupid. It may not be they are defying you; it may be that they don't understand or can't do what you are asking. Their defiance may be their way of buying time to think and process. One mom, frustrated that her son always answered "I don't know" to her request finally asked him why he responded that way. He answered, "Because you get mad at me if I don't say anything". Drug affected children are 10 second people in a 3 second world. Slow down for them.

Drug affected and/or traumatized children often need more time to process and respond. Be sensitive and build in some extra breathing room when asking them to do something. Ask them if they understand what you want by repeating in their own words what you want.

Structuring for Success

You can't pick up a book or go to a parenting class without hearing about children's need for structure. What is meant by structure and why is it so important? Structure is the glue that makes children feel safe and helps them succeed. Structure is composed of rules, rewards, consistency, consequences, love, sense of safety and security. The healthiest type of structure is flexible structure. Children need firm, clear structure with enough flexibility so they have room to explore when they are doing well. When they struggle and backslide, "pull in the reins" and draw them close until they are calm and back on track. Consider the child's developmental stage and *emotional* age when deciding on the structure that will work best for the child.

Spirit of Discipline or Spirit of Gentleness?

Think about what it means through a child's eyes. At an age when most kids are securely nestled in the tender care of attentive, loving parents, the child has learned independence and self-reliance through unrelenting pain, harsh treatment or neglect. He has experienced more loss in his short life than most of us have in a lifetime. Loss, hurt, disappointment and anger have punctuated their life. It is what is expected. It is normal.

Which is a more effective parenting style, militant or mentoring? Discipline with love and tenderness, or anger and frustration? What the child is accustomed to and what the child needs are two different things. The child is used to evoking anger, violence, and frustration. You have to gently, but firmly, communicate you mean what you say and you will follow through. If parents are indecisive, afraid or intimidated, children will feel scared, insecure and will crank up their behavior to push you to take a stand and keep them in line (Keck 2000). From the child's perspective, if the parent is not strong enough to parent him, he does not believe he is strong enough to protect them. Gregory Keck, an adoption therapist encourages parents to be "benevolent dictators." Children need to know parents are in charge and are capable of caring and protecting them. This does not mean parents should be cruel, harsh or demeaning, but they do need the strength of character to hold their ground and their children accountable.

With time, acceptance, perseverance and purposeful parenting, the child's protective wall will begin to crumble as he feels safe and secure. Random acts of kindness go a long way to prove your character and commitment. Remember each of the consequences offered are to be tempered with gentleness and grace. You must work to establish a relationship with the child and consequences are only going to be effective to the extent the child your child knows and trusts you. This takes time and it is not easy.

Fill your Toolbox—Twelve Governing Principles To Follow

There is no one “cure all” guaranteed to fix any given problem. Our goal is not to provide you with a quick fix, but to equip you with practical strategies for your parenting toolbox. It is your job to assess the situation and choose the best “tool” to use given you and your child’s temperament, history and the current situation.

Regardless of the chosen intervention, remember these governing principles.

1. Teach, **DON'T** punish. This is the goal of effective consequences. There are many different kinds of consequences: natural, positive logical, negative logical and uncooperative. Successful parents learn to use all four.
2. Teach, **DON'T** preach. Children often hear little of what we say. Drug affected children process about every third word spoken to them. As adults we tend to be long winded and can over explain, i.e. lecture. Remember K.I.S.S. (Keep It Short and Simple)... and slow down!
3. Every day is a new day. Children with special needs often live by this motto. Immediate, concrete consequences are best. Children who are grounded for a week will commonly protest...“But I was good **TODAY**.” Yesterday is gone and forgotten and they won’t connect Monday’s misbehavior to Thursday’s loss of privileges.
4. Discipline in love and gentleness. Children are going to do everything in their power to provoke you to wrath and are experts at finding triggers you didn’t even know you had. Parental self-control is essential for the success of any intervention. Remember they are going to try to control events to recreate the chaos and abuse they came from. Providing consequences in a loving manner gives children the opportunity to learn a new way of communicating.
5. Mistrust and fear drive behaviors. For a traumatized child, control equates survival. The need for control is driven by the fear of being vulnerable and hurt again. His short relational history is littered with broken attachments. He will not be quick to trust you. Don’t personalize rejection. It is not about you.
6. Look at the behavior in the context of how it helped your child **SURVIVE**. A fresh perspective may give you the extra measure of patience and endurance to make it through another day. The book, The Connected Child by Karyn Purvis provides a helpful chart understanding of the meaning behind some of children’s most perplexing behaviors. This chart is included in the appendix of this study.

Effective Consequences

- Are done in love and gentleness
- Promote self-control
- Model self-control
- Prompt self-evaluation
- Encourages change
- Demonstrate patience

7. **Consistent does not mean predictable.** Children may pressure you to commit to a consequence so they have the chance to weigh the behavior against the consequence. For example a child planning on sneaking out for a party may ask what the consequence will be determine whether going to the party will be worth the resulting consequence. Consistency means there will be a consequence, the child will be safe and you will always love them. Use a variety of safe, relevant consequences. (Deborah Hage, 2000)
8. **Promote self-control.** The goal is not to control the child's behavior; it is to help the child develop self-control. Effective use of consequences and structuring the child's environment will encourage positive change. Think of yourself as their coach and teacher. Responsibility for their behavior rests with them, not you. If you are more bothered by their behavior then they are, they are not going to be motivated to change.
9. **Give the power of choice.** Always present a child with a choice. You control the choices, they control what option they choose. Limit choices to two.
10. **"You Can't Make Me!"** They are right. You can't. Find ways to agree with the child. It de-escalates the situation as it is hard to fight with someone who is agreeing with you. Fundamentally you cannot make a child eat, sleep or listen. However, you can attach very relevant consequences to whatever choices he does make. Look for ways to give the child control.
10. **Put Off, Put On.** The goal is not just for a child to "put off" old behaviors but to "put on" new ones. Think of it like getting dressed. You are giving them warm, beautiful new clothes. To put on the new clothes, they have to take off their old, torn, dirty ones. Put off the old to put on the new. Keep your focus on the new behavior, not the old one. For example, instead of telling a child "don't lie" (the old clothes), tell them "be honest" (the new clothes). Reward and acknowledge all positive progress.
11. **You break it, you fix it!** Make it the child's responsibility to fix what was broken the problem, and make restitutions if necessary. Be willing to help him if needed as long as he asks respectfully.

Note: Traumatized children can fear breaking or spilling things because of fear of punishment or consequences. Help children understand the difference between accidental and on purpose.

12. **Admit your failures, mistakes and imperfections.** One of the most powerful things you can do for your child is apologize when you blow it, take responsibility and restore the relationship. You are modeling accountability, humility and acceptance to your child. You may have to teach them how to respond to an apology, but they will respect and trust you more in the long run.

Note: Don't allow your guilt over mishandling the situation keeps you from providing relevant consequences to the child. Misbehavior must be addressed.

Types of Consequences:

The goal of any consequence is to teach the child. Many people associate consequences with punishment, but that should not be the case. Consequences are a part of everyday life. Some consequences are in our control, others naturally occur and some are imposed by others. Consequences are an effective means to encourage, mold, direct and shape behavior for adults and children alike. In this section, we will define four types of consequences, *Natural, Positive Logical, Negative Logical and Non-cooperative*.

Natural Consequences:

Natural consequences are great teachers. This means the parent steps back and lets nature run its course. This can be hard for parents as the inclination is to rescue the child from any and all discomfort. However, it is helpful to remember the one who is the most uncomfortable will be the one motivated to change. A child who forgets his mittens will not be motivated to remember them if his mom always runs to bring them to him. A child who forgets his mittens will have cold hands during recess or will not be able to go out to recess. This can be a good incentive to remember his mittens the next time. For traumatized or drug affected children, their ability to draw cause and effect conclusions may be limited. Explain to the child the connection between cold hands and forgotten mittens. Picture cues, verbal prompts, structure, routines and rituals are very helpful to help children learn from consequences.

Other examples of natural consequences are:

- *If you don't study- you fail the test.*
- *Forget your lunch - experience hunger.*
- *Make a mess, clean it up.*
- *Forget your mittens, have cold hands.*

Logical Consequences:

There are two types of logical consequences, negative and positive. Logical consequences differ from natural consequence in that these consequences require the parent to intervene, building a consequence into the behavior that would not occur naturally. Logical consequences can be positive or negative.

Negative Logical Consequences: These consequences add a “loss” to behavior (such as a privilege, or activity) or add an extra duty or assignment for the child to complete. The negative outcome acts as a deterrent for the child to engage in the behavior again. The person who experiences the most discomfort with the behavior will be the one motivated to change. Take homework for example: a parent who is nagging and worried about a child's upcoming test may go to great lengths to ensure the child prepares and passes. The child isn't worried or motivated because he knows his parent is. The child will be motivated to study through the discomfort of a failing grade. Or, consider a child who is chronically late for school. A logical consequence would be an earlier bedtime. If the child does not like going to bed early, then he will make it a point to be get up and be on time for school. In order to serve as a

deterrent, the consequence must be relevant to the child. If the child likes going to bed early, then there is no motivation to get up on time in the morning. When using negative consequences, be supportive and encouraging to the child. When she messes up, pick her up, dust her off and set her back on the path for another try after she completes the consequence. Make it clear that you are on the child's team and want her to succeed.

Be cautious when using negative consequences. Sometimes parents lose sight of when to stop. If one consequence doesn't work, they often try another that is harsher. Your foster child will figure out which buttons to push and parents sometimes can quickly lose patience. You begin to see the snowball effect. Remember it is hard to take away something from a child who has already lost everything. Too many negative consequences may have the opposite effect of escalating the child's behavior. The child may think, "Why not go for it, I have nothing else to lose" or they just quit caring and won't try anymore. If you see this pattern beginning to develop

STOP!

Take a time out to regroup, refocus and refresh your spirit. Call a friend, grab some chocolate or order take out for dinner. Take some time to take care of yourself. Your children are learning how to manage their emotions by watching you manage yours.

When you are calm, you are in a better position to re-evaluate your interventions. Shift your focus from negative behaviors to the positive ones. Look for progress and reward it. Celebrate small victories. Talk with your child and acknowledge his feelings and what you are seeing. Get help from a counselor if needed to support you and your child in your relationship.

Some examples of negative consequences are:

- *Break a toy; you can no longer play with it.*
- *If you lie, you lose the right to be believed.*
- *If you slam the door, you lose door privileges. (You can also be proactive and put weather stripping around the door as this will form a vacuum so the door doesn't make the slamming noise.)*
- *If you don't eat dinner, you miss dessert or late night snacks. While some snacks can be treated as a privilege, nutritious snacks such as fruits should be made available. You should never use withhold food as a punishment.*
- *If you are slow to get ready for school, you go to bed ½ hour earlier.*

Positive Logical Consequences:

These consequences add a special treat, activity or privilege to a behavior. Like negative consequences, in order to be effective, the consequence must be motivating to the child. If the reward for finishing their homework is ice cream and the child is lactose intolerant, then the consequence is not going to be an effective motivator. If the child is old enough ask him for suggestions, you may be surprised at what he will come up with.

- If you do all your chores, you get to ride your bike.
- If you have good grades, you get a swim day at H2 Oasis.
- If you finish your homework, you earn weekend movie privileges.
- Since you have been so helpful all week, we are going out for ice cream.
- You got mad and regained control a lot faster this time... good job!
- You put a lot of effort into studying. I know you did your best. I am proud of you.

Remember:

Be liberal with praise, and encouragement.

Be intentional about seeking out the positive in a child and encouraging progress in the right direction.

Reward baby steps and small victories. For a child failing in school, a D+ from an F is upward mobility and is reason to celebrate.

Look for progress and reward effort, not outcome.

Non-Cooperative Consequences: Many parents are frustrated and at a loss when the child refuses to cooperate with a consequence. It is common to hear from parents, he won't go to time out, stay in his room or do the assigned chore. For these situations, parents can use non-cooperative consequences. These are consequences that do not require the child's cooperation to be effective. Examples of non-cooperative consequences are removing phone or movie privileges or restricting privileges like time with friends. These consequences require parental actions and are not dependent on the child's cooperation. These consequences give all the responsibility to the child. When he decides to cooperate and complete the request, then the privilege is restored. The parent can release control to the child. Relax and ask the child to tell you when he is ready. Eventually he is going to ask you for something, then respond with "I would be happy to as soon as you finishing the extra chore or do your time out."

Parent Note: Video games, cell phones, long distance services, iPods and television are privileges, not rights. Kids can and do manage without them.

Counterintuitive Parenting

Traumatized children can be very sensitive to being abandoned and can feel isolated and rejected if sent to time out for misbehavior. While the natural response is to separate from the child, what many children need is the opposite. They need to be drawn closer to you, be reassured that you still love them and they will get through this tantrum. Parents can set boundaries around tantrums and hitting, but they can remain with the child, to help calm the storm. When the child feels the most out of control, unlovable and rejected is when he needs your presence the most. Remember early trauma restricts their capacity to engage in reciprocal relationships. You have to take the high road with them, giving love and acceptance while expecting little to nothing in return, especially in the beginning. When they get into trouble at school, go to them, be present in a firm but loving way that clearly communicates you care enough to be there when they need you. Stand with them as they manage the consequences of their behavior.

Natural and logical consequences are wonderful teachers. However, to be effective there is a prerequisite that is rarely considered. Living in state of chronic discomfort is normal for these children. Enduring periods of hunger, thirst, being too hot or too cold, being scared or having to sit in wet or soiled diapers was commonplace and a part of their everyday life. To survive, they learned to ignore bodily cues and expect no relief.

A child who has never been bundled up in snow gear on a winter's day by loving parents or been snuggled in a warm blanket on a cold night does not know warmth is an option. Before you can teach this child to remember his coat, you have to teach them what it is to be warm and to recognize respond to their body cues of being cold.

As said before, consequences should be cushioned in grace and kindness. You need to establish yourself as a person who will make time for them and love and care for them especially when they mess up. They need to know you are on their team; you will hold them accountable but at the same time will help them learn what they need know. As they are learning to remember their mittens, be willing to bring them to them once in a while. Surprise them with random acts of kindness. This will reinforce your love and care for them.

A traumatized child often believes that the only time adults call him is when he is in trouble. To counter this belief, surprise the child with random acts of kindness. Call him to you for no reason other than to bless and encourage him. Take opportunities to surprise him with his favorite dessert, a small treat or a hug. Tell him you love him and be specific about what you appreciate most about him. In this manner, parents can help establish their character as a people with hearts to give good things to the child.

When addressing negative behaviors in children, remember that for some traumatized children, the only attention they received was through misbehaving and/or abuse. They often don't know there are positive ways to ask for and receive attention. Parents need to ask themselves if their interactions with their child are primarily positive or negative.



PART TWO:

Creative Parenting Strategies for Traumatized Children Ready...Set...Strategize!

Now that we have set the foundation for effective strategies, you are prepared to choose and implement the idea that best fits your style and situation. Listed below are ten of the more challenging behaviors exhibited by traumatized children. *Remember if your child is in foster care, you want to take extra care to document and consult with your child's therapist and OCS worker.*

NOTE: *Make sure your strategies are acceptable and are within the foster parent regulations.*

Stealing

For many children, stealing was a means for survival. The only way they could get what they wanted was to take it from others. Children do not have an income source and they depend on adults to meet their needs. When adults don't, children learn to fend for themselves by whatever means available. This is a persistent habit that will not be given up easily. Even in the face of abundance, many traumatized children continue to steal as their understanding of the world is that it is unpredictable and can't be counted on. Trust does not develop quickly. Parents often struggle with stealing behaviors because they perceive it as an attack on their character and generosity and see it as a reflection of their parenting ability. Remember the behavior is not about you, it served a purpose for the survival of the child.

Strategies for Stealing

- a. Establish a family rule that any item that is "found" or "given" to the child will go into "time out" until its origin can be established.
- b. Deborah Hage, a therapeutic parenting expert, recommends the following strategy: *Whether you know if the child stole the item or not, don't ask the child. You are setting up the child to compound the issue of stealing with lying. State the fact. For example \$5 is missing. Then assign the consequence. You know who steals and who doesn't in your home. Manage protests with these statements: (Note that they are **NOT** accusatory in tone. To be effective, parental voice tone and emotion must be calm.)*
 - Would your classmates convict you?
 - What do you think I believe?
 - Who in this house steals?
 - Who has stolen in the past?
 - If I am wrong, then I will pay it back to you

NOTE: Do not accuse the child or engage in a power struggle. Remember you do not have to trust a child to love them. Deborah Hage encourages parents to “love the child while keeping him in your line of vision.”

- Establish a restitution program. Stolen items are returned to the owner with three of the child’s own toys, or the toys can be donated to charity. The parent chooses the items. Teach that stealing will always results in less, not more. Stealing will result in fewer privileges, less stuff and less freedom. The child needs to own his choice and the consequence that goes with it.
- For older children, establish a rule that they pay back double.
- Have the offending child write an apology letter and go to the person he stole from to present the items and letter.
- Initiate pocket checks. Explain in a calm tone that while they are learning self-control, you will do pocket checks. Complete this in a matter of fact manner **not** with a punitive attitude.
- Prior to each trip to a store, ask them to repeat the family rule on stealing. Ask a child with a pattern of stealing how he is going to manage his impulse to take something.
- Let natural consequences occur: If they steal at the store, encourage security or the police get involved. If they continue to steal as they get older, involvement with police will be a reality.
- “Close pockets” As a last resort sew the pockets closed on the child’s clothes. Explain that when he has demonstrated self-control, you will open up his pockets again. (Before using this intervention, consult with therapist, licensing or social workers).
- Find out what the child wants and help him find ways to earn it.

Lying

Children lie for a number of reasons. Telling the truth may have resulted in beatings or abuse and lying provided a way to avoid trouble or responsibility. Children may have been taught to lie to cover up what was happening in their home. Lying may have been a way to cover up feelings of failure and inadequacy as it provides a way the child can be the person and have the life they can only dream about. When confronting a lie, Deborah Hage has these words of wisdom. “Don’t ask if you know. Don’t ask if you don’t know.” Either way, you are setting the child up to lie again.

Strategies for Lying

- State “*I am sorry, I don’t believe you*” and proceed to the consequence.
- Ask the child, “*Are you making up a story or did this happen? Is this the truth or do you wish it was true*” Prompt him to try again.

- Ask him what a “witness” would say.
- Ask the child, “*Do you want big consequences or little ones?*” Present a choice. Explain that lying means bigger consequences.
- Tell the child, “*I wish I could believe you, but without a credible witness I can’t.*” Discuss the importance of character and trust.
- Author Shari Steelsmith in her book **Go to Your Room!** recommends explaining it to the child like this, “*Well, you told me a lie today. Now I can’t believe anything you say. Unless you always tell the truth, I don’t know when to believe you.*”
- Ask the child “*Is this the truth or make believe?*” every time they tell you something questionable.
- Ask him “*What would happen if you told me the truth?*” Sometimes children lie out of fear of the punishment.
- Ask the child “*What happens if you lie?*” and “*What happens if you tell the truth?*” Ask him which one he is going to choose.

Arguing

An argumentative child can be emotionally exhausting and physically draining. Shari Steelsmith in her book **Go to Your Room!** identifies some of the most common reasons children argue.

- To delay compliance with your request
- To challenge your authority
- To convince you they are right and get you to change your mind
- To negotiate and talk their way out of the consequence or circumstance
- To wear you down
- To make you suffer, wait and pay
- For control

For many parents, an argumentative child can take them to their wits’ end. It’s like being nibbled to death by a duck; you just want it to stop. The time to address arguing is when it **FIRST** starts. Don’t wait until you are exhausted and on your last nerve to address it.

If verbal conflicts are a trigger for you, it is essential that you take the time to calm yourself down, get control of your voice tone and attitude before you engage the child. If you feel yourself escalate, walk away. Take a break. Remember the first rule of airline safety also applies to parenting. Take care of your needs **BEFORE** you tend to the needs of your child.

Strategies for an Argumentative Child

- Establish the rule: ***the longer you argue, the longer you lose privileges***
- State: “*We are done talking about this*” and walk away
- State: “*If you want to argue, you will have less time for television, videos, stories etc.*”

- Be a broken record. *“Brush your teeth now please! Teeth now please...Teeth now please...”*
- Ask the child, *“What did I say?”* If they say, “I dunno,” tell him that is a bummer and direct him to his room to think about it.
- Reply: *“I am not going to argue with you.”* End the discussion
- Ask the child. *“What happens if you argue?”* **Note:** Make sure the child has been told the consequence for arguing.
- Help the child think through their decision with any of the following questions.
 - “Do you want to lose movie time tonight? If yes, keep arguing, if “no” what do you need to do?”*
 - Ask “do you want to go to bed early tonight?”*
 - Ask “What do you need to do to get what you want?”*
 - Ask “Is whining a good way to get what you want?”*
 - Ask “Can you try that again with a different tone?”*
 - Ask “Did you mean to sound so disrespectful? Do you want to try again?”*
- Explain to them arguing means double consequences.
- For older children, explain that verbal arguments are not accepted. All protests and pleas must be submitted in writing.
- When your child begins to argue, stop, and ask if he has a dollar. When they ask why (and they will ask why) explain that is cost of an argument. If they don’t want to pay it, say, *“oh well, guess you can’t argue”* and walk away. Do this in a light-hearted manner.
- If the child engages you in an argument, say “We don’t have time to argue, we will have to reschedule.” Then set a new time to complete the argument, preferable prior to a privilege time, such as movie time. This will keep the argument short if it happens at all.
- Set aside 15 minutes a day as argument time. Sit down and argue with your child over anything during that time. You can use that time to teach them solid debating skills.
- Don’t be distracted by drama or diversionary tactics. Be direct, such as, *“What does having a hard life have to do with doing the dishes?”* Call them on their behavior, for example, *“You are procrastinating and trying to avoid your chore.”*
- Acknowledge and praise when the child complies without arguing. Surprise her with a treat or extra privilege.
- Thank her every time she complies without arguing.
- Praise and brag about a child’s progress in front of others.
- Model the desired response, make the request, and then answer it for him.

Example:

Parent: *"Please get ready for bed."*

Child: *"I'm not tired, can I stay up and watch TV? I don't want to go to bed!"*

Parent: Modeling answer, *"Yes, mom, I will do it right away."*

Parent: Motioning the child to bed *"Bed now please!"*

Aggression

Aggressive behavior can be used to intimidate others, to gain control, to avoid closeness with others or as way to deal with intense feelings. The goal of managing aggressive behavior is to teach the child to express anger safely.

Preventive Strategies

The best way to manage aggressive behavior is when the child is calm. Practice and discuss strategies. Develop an action plan with the child. Help him recognize his own body cues and prompt him to take five before he gets out of control. Use visual tags and stories. Be creative to make self-control fun and interesting, not punitive. Tell him everyone gets angry, but most people can be angry and safe. You have to demonstrate to the child that "anger" does not mean violence or perpetration.

- Help the child identify emotional and physical triggers. For example, *"By your voice I can tell you are getting angry, what do you need to do to express anger safely?" "Do you want to be alone or can I hold you?" "Would you like to go jump around outside?"*
- Hold a family meeting and brainstorm ideas of how to manage frustration. Post the ideas on the fridge. Tell each child to put a star by his favorite idea.
- Read stories in a children's book about anger and how to handle it. Discuss it with your child. Ask if he thinks the ideas in the story work in real life. Find out why or why not.
- Praise and be joyfully exuberant when the child uses self-control. Make a big fuss about it!
- Create a successful child story illustrating what it would look like for your child to use self-control.
- Take pictures of your child with angry expressions and make a photo tag with three of the best anger management ideas on it.
- Make a match game out of the feelings pictures. When children get a match, talk about what feeling that face looks like. Ask them to tell about a time they had that feeling.
- Many special needs children have a difficult time "shifting gears." Give them lots of notice and time to transition from one activity to another.
- Explain that it is okay to be angry, but not okay to be unsafe. Help them be angry in a healthy way.

- Provide a physical outlet for their emotion and energy. Tae Kwon Do, soccer, basketball, swimming, etc. Physical outlets release emotions while building strength, skill and self-esteem.
- Make an anger book with the child, using computer programs such as Smilebox.com or Blurb.com to help. Draw the child closer to you. Be very present in interactions with others, providing prompting, interventions and helping the child manage conflict and frustration. Remember anger usually covers feelings of hurt, fear and rejection.
- Provide music as an option to express anger or to calm and soothe the child.
- When children feel the most hurt and rejected is when they need us the most. You, as the adult need to seek out the child. After a major blow out, it is essential you go to the child and restore the relationship.

Create a "safe haven"

All kinds of things can affect an individual's behaviors including events, relationships and situations inside and outside the home. There are some things you can do to structure the environment to provide support and set it up for success.

- Keep the environment simple and safe, removing excess toys and items.
- Keep large pillows or cushions in their rooms. Children can hide under, snuggle with, or cry into the pillows as needed. Pillows don't break easily and won't hurt if thrown.
- Paint the room in calming neutral/soft colors instead of bold primary ones. Create a "safe spot," fort or tent where the child can go to calm himself.
- Help the child find a "lovey" a comfort stuffed toy or blanket that helps calm him down.
- Use sound diffusers, and soft music at night times and quiet times. Give the child night lights, and set up monitors to assure the child you will be there when he/she needs you
- Buy or make a dream catcher to help with fears of bad thoughts and dreams.

Setting the Standard: Creating Family Rules Aggressive Behavior

Children should know in advance the result of destroying property or hurting others. The rules and consequences should apply to everyone in the home, so one child does not feel unfairly singled out. Settling on consequences ahead of time also limits the amount of arguing and protests when the consequences occur. Post the family guidelines in a prominent place where they can be referred to as needed.

If you aren't already having family meetings, it is a good time to start. This is a wonderful forum to discuss concerns, celebrate victories and establish family rules. During a family meeting, the standard of self-control can be discussed and the whole family can discuss the consequences for violations. It is also a great time to talk about how one person's behavior affects the family unit.

Family Rules

- If they destroy their room or property, they will be expected to fix it or replace it with chores or allowances.
- Establish the rule, anything that is broken or thrown in a fit of anger will be put in time out. Broken items will be thrown away.
- If someone else's property is broken, they fix it or work to replace it.
- Children can ask for a time out or take a few minutes to regain control.
- Family members can ask to exercise or listen to music to calm down
- Family members can ask to be left alone when angry, as long as they are safe
- Pre-teach the child that everyone makes mistakes. It is not the end of the world. Model and encourage them to accept responsibility, accept consequences, and keep trying.

Strategies for the Storm

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the child still loses it. Here are some strategies to weather a storm in progress. As with all the other strategies, consult your child's therapist (or other professionals before implementing.

- Place a younger child in a place where he can tantrum, scream, kick safely away from others. In a calm voice, tells the child, *"self-control please..."* repeat.
- For an escalating child, firmly and directly set boundaries and give directions. Stop, Take Five. Give him an option to release anger through physical exercise.
- Stop the aggression and give options. Tell the child "be gentle with sister, scream into your pillow, listen to music, go shoot baskets, etc.
- Explain violence will not be tolerated. Demonstrate that you are strong enough to keep them safe and everyone else safe. Do this by following through with consequences and getting help if needed.
- Prescribe the behavior. If you expect a tantrum, prescribe. Tell the child *"I know you are going to tantrum when I ask you to do this, so I want to give you time to do it. Go ahead, right here, kick, scream, and get it out."*
- Deal with threats in a matter-of-fact manner. Identify the underlying emotions, fear, need for control, anger, hurt, etc. Explain consequences. *"If you threaten me or the family, I will get the help and support needed to keep everyone safe."*
- Name the child's emotion such as; *"you seem really mad right now"*. Allow the child to correct you; *"I am not angry I am"*
- Try rocking or holding younger children to help them self sooth and calm themselves.

Post Tantrum Processing

- It is important parents re-establish the relationship with the child after the tantrum. Don't let the child sit in feelings of rejection and abandonment for messing up.
- Discuss what the child could do differently in the future.
- Discuss apologies and consequences. Help them complete consequences if needed.
- Hold and hug the child if he will permit it
- Wait until the child is calm, not pouting or resistant to process.
- Ask the child, "Are you ready to talk yet?" If they answer no, leave and tell them you will check back in 5 minutes.
- Maintain a matter of fact, forgiving attitude.

Sexualized Behavior

Dealing with sexualized behavior can be frightening for parents, especially if they are not comfortable talking about sex or sexuality. Be proactive in how you will react to sexual behavior. Stay calm and remember you are teaching them healthy safe boundaries. Children will act out what has been done to them and what they have seen. These children need to learn healthy boundaries and be provided with age appropriate sexual information. Through setting limits, providing education and structuring your home you can help sexually abused children find success in your home.

Structuring Space for Success

- Keep boys' and girls' rooms separate
- If you anticipate a problem or have ongoing issues of children going into other children's room, use door beepers or monitors to encourage safety. Check with your licensing and social worker first. This should be a team decision amongst the resource parent, OCS and the therapist.
- Keep younger and older children in separate rooms.
- Keep internet access restricted to common areas and monitor its use. Learn to use the parental controls on your cable and internet services to restrict access to unsuitable materials.

Setting the Standard: Creating Family Rules for Safety

- Establish clear rules about touching and hugging, i.e., ask permission before hugging.
- Establish clear rules on toileting, bathing and modesty.
- One person in the bathroom at a time.
- Children's activities in common areas. No play behind closed doors.
- Bathroom door is closed when someone is toileting or bathing.

- Family members are to be robed when leaving the bathroom.
- Bedroom doors are shut when changing clothes.
- When bedroom doors are closed, knock and get permission before entering.
- Create clear, concise rules, such as: Grown-ups don't touch kid's private parts, keep private parts private.
- Children will not share beds with other children or adults.

Additional Parenting Strategies for Sexualized Behavior

- Initiate open, honest discussions about sex and masturbation.
- Eliminate horseplay or tickling as they can be misinterpreted.
- Teach and practice how to respond if someone touches you inappropriately.
- Use books and stories to explain good and bad touches.
- Cultivate open communication, free of shame and secrecy.
- Provide sight and sound supervision, which means you can hear and see the child at all times.
- If your child masturbates in public, redirect him explaining that masturbation is private and not done in public.
- Don't over-react if your child touches someone else's private parts. Redirect him, and repeat the rules about touching.
- Model personal power. Demonstrate telling others in a direct assertive manner to stop acting in a way you don't like.
- Clarify boundaries and roles in the family as many children don't understand proper roles, i.e., adults call children sweetheart, but children do not call adults terms of endearment.
- Give children the power to say no to being hugged or kissed by others.
- All children should be taught to report behavior that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Use proper words for body parts and sexual behaviors, i.e., penis, vagina, rectum, masturbation, intercourse.
- Explain that sexual feelings are normal but they don't control a person, and having a feeling doesn't mean you have to act on it. Explain and teach self-control.
- Use the rule of three: avoid one adult alone with a child without another adult.
- Teach the difference between secrets, surprises and privacy. No secret games, stories, present or clubs, especially with adults.
- Teach modest dress. Do not allow the child to dress or move in a seductive manner. Bathing suits should be worn only while swimming not walking around the house. Parents should model appropriate attire.

- In public, use restrooms that are single occupancy or have an adult supervise the child in public restrooms, especially if other children are present. Sexualized children are vulnerable to further victimization or victimizing others.
- Do not snuggle under blankets or towels. Keep hands visible at all times.
- Teach the child about healthy sexuality, do not shame or embarrass the child for acting out what he/she has been taught about sex.

Running Away

Children run for a variety of reasons. They may have learned early in life that their survival or escape from harm depended on how fast they could run. Other children may run as a way to avoid conflict, strong emotions or use it as a manipulative ploy to get what they want. How you respond to a child who runs away will depend on the specific circumstance and the age of the child.

- Be proactive. If you know your child is a runner, make a plan before he is in crisis. Give the child alternatives to running, i.e., taking a time out, asking for help or engaging in a relaxing activity.

Help them think through their decision to run. The goal is to help them think through their decision and not respond impulsively. Ask them some of the following questions.

Do you have money?

Can you find your coat, hat and mittens?

What clothes are you going to take?

How are you going to protect yourself robbery and rape?

What about food? Can I make you a peanut butter sandwich for the road?

- For older children, tell them what will happen if they choose to run. The police will be called, they will go to a shelter or respite provider for the night and all electronic and non essential “toys” will be removed prior to their return.
- Do not try to physically stop them. If they are going to run, offer a suggestion of where they can run. Ask them questions about what they want to take with them. It is helpful if you have some “safe people” already lined up for the child to go to for a time out.
- Talk through the consequences of a decision to run and a decision to stay.
- Create a “safe sanctuary” or person they can run to. If they need to get away, develop a code word so you know where they are going. Teach them if they ask for a “cooling off period” you will help them get one safely.
- Emphasize safety. Explain that you need to know that they will be safe. If they are a danger to themselves, you will do whatever necessary to keep them safe, i.e., calling for help.

- Help them identify the “big feelings” underneath their desire to run. Use statements such as, “ *must be really hurt or angry to want to get away.*”
- Model “I” Statements. “*I will be very sad and scared for your safety if you run away. I will miss you. I hope you make a different choice.*” *I will miss you on movie night this weekend.*
- Some children have learned to run in response to rejection, fear or pain. For these children, gently teach them to run to you. As a part of creating a secure attachment, they need to experience you as a source of protection and safety.

Self-Harm

Self-harming behaviors can range from scratching and picking at one’s skin or sores to cutting or injecting harmful substances into the body. *Younger children may head bang, give themselves rug burns, bash their bodies into objects or hit themselves.* When dealing with self-harming behaviors enlist the help and support of a highly trained counselor and communicate and consult with the social worker before implementing these strategies. A team approach is most effective in determining how to best support and manage these types of behavior. It is important that you work with your child’s therapist to find what will be best for your individual child.

Below are some of the reasons children/adolescents hurt themselves. *Taken from an article Self Injury, Types, Causes and Treatment posted on Helpguide.org with contributions from Deborah Cutter, Psy.D., Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., February 08.*

Self-injury can **regulate strong emotions**. It can put a person who is at a high level of physiological arousal back to a baseline state.

- Deliberate self-harm can **distract from emotional pain** and stop feelings of numbness.
- Self-inflicted violence is a way to **express things that cannot be put into words** such as displaying anger, shocking others or seeking support and help.
- Self-injurious behavior can **exert a sense of control over your body** if you feel powerless in other areas of your life. Sometimes magical thinking is involved and you may imagine that hurting yourself will prevent something worse from happening. Also, when you hurt yourself it influences the behavior of others and can manipulate people into feeling guilty, make them care, or make them go away.
- Self punishment or self-hate may be involved. Some people who self-injure have a childhood **history of physical, sexual and emotional abuse**. They may erroneously blame themselves for having been abused, they may feel that they deserved it and are now punishing themselves because of self-hatred and low self-esteem.
- Self-abuse can also be a **self-soothing behavior** for someone who does not have other means to calm intense emotions. Self-injury followed by tending to one’s own wounds is a way to express self-care and be self-nurturing for someone who never learned how to do that in a more direct way.

Ways you can help a child who is engaging in self harm: Taken from an article *Self Injury, Types, Causes and Treatment* posted on Helpguide.org with contributions from Deborah Cutter, Psy.D., Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#), February 08.

- *Understand that self-harming behavior is an attempt to maintain a certain amount of control which in and of itself is a way of self-soothing*
- *Let the person know that you care about them and are available to listen*
- *Encourage expressions of emotions including anger*
- *Spend time doing enjoyable activities together*
- *Find a therapist or support group to help them*
- *Don't make judgmental comments or tell the person to stop the self-harming behavior – people who feel worthless and powerless are even more likely to self-injure*

Strategies for Specific behaviors:

Picking at skin and sores

- Help the child identify the times or feeling when he feels most compelled to pick.
- If the child is older, have him keep a journal of his feelings and events prior to picking.
- Provide the child with alternative behaviors, for example; finger manipulative toys, exercise, talking, taking a bath.
- Reward the child for going a specific period of time without picking or scratching.
- Give lotion or baby oil for the child to massage into his skin.

For pulling out hair

- Make sure to have a thorough physical examination of the child to rule out any physical condition that may be causing a child to pull at her hair.
- Get a doll for the child as a substitute for pulling her own hair out.
- Grow a small box of grass for the child to pull up when he feels the compulsion.
- Identify a safe person the child can go to when he begins to get stressed and engage in the behavior.
- Identify triggers for the behavior through observation and self-report.
- Praise all progress towards the ultimate goal.
- Give the child lotion or baby oil to put on.
- Engage the help of an occupational therapist to address possible sensory issues.
- Do not shame or embarrass the child.

Foul Language

Here are some creative ways to manage cursing, from parenting experts Shari Steelsmith and Deborah Hage. The success of these and every intervention hinges on parental self-control and method of delivery. Parents must maintain a matter of fact tone and demeanor for these interventions to be effective.

- Empathize – *“Someone must have hurt you very badly for you to talk to me that way. Only a heart full of hurt spews language like that.”*
- Respond in a calm, matter of fact manner, *“Why, in heaven’s name would you want a (repeat the curse word the child used) to do that for you? Help me understand.”*
- Draw the line of cause and effect for them. *“Were you aware that a person you just cursed out is not going to want to spend time with you or help you out?”*
- Prescribe the symptom. Prescribe what they are going to do and give them permission to do it. The verbal exchange may go something like this: (From Deborah Hague 2000)

Parent: *-I want you to take out the trash, but I am reluctant to ask because I know you have some foul language bubbling up and waiting to come out so why don’t we get that out of the way first. Do your spew and then I will ask you for what I want you to do.*

Child: *(Rolling eyes) I can do it without doing that!*

Parent: *Naw! I don’t believe it; well we can try it if you really think you can. Man that would be very amazing!*

Child: Does it, stomping off.

Parent: *Wow! You are seriously maturing. I am very impressed.*

- Explain to the child, if you want to use bathroom language, you need to take it to the bathroom. Go with the child to the bathroom and stand with her as she uses all the potty language she wants. This takes the fun and shock value out of cursing.
- For older children, have them give you a definition of the word they are using. Give them an assignment to write the definition, but also why they chose that word to describe you. Give them a thesaurus to find some alternative expressions. All other activities are suspended until the assignment is complete.
- Repeat the word calmly stating, *“I don’t appreciate hearing the word (repeat the curse word). Because you are choosing to express yourself disrespectfully, I don’t feel motivated to (take you shopping, to the movies, allow you phone privileges etc.)”*
- Get a fish bowl. Put in \$20.00 in quarters, poker chips or Chuck E Cheese tokens. Each time a family member curses, a quarter or chip is taken out. However much money is left at the end of the week is used for family fun night, i.e., videos and/or pizza. Make this a family event applying to parents and children alike.

Conclusion

As we said earlier, there is no one “magic cure” for working with traumatized children. Whichever strategies you choose, remember the guiding principles: change starts with **YOU** the parent. All interventions are to be implemented with a heart attitude of gentleness and love, and stem from a desire to see that child break free from “survival mode” and enter into a future filled with productivity and healthy relationships. Refer to the Appendix A and review the chart of the driving force behind many challenging behaviors.

For foster families, make sure you are in continual communication with your licensing and social worker as to what you are doing with the child. Make sure you document behavior, interventions and the progress of the child. Engaging in a team approach will help you maintain perspective and balance in your interventions and will greatly increase the healing and progress of the child in your care.