

## A trauma informed care approach to understanding behaviors

The methods presented are not something to be used occasionally. For them to be fully effective, you must apply them consistently across all areas of your child's life at all times. Eventually, even though implementation can be difficult at first, these techniques will become second nature to you.

Even if you've tried some of the techniques in the past, it is important to try them again — you may have been less consistent with implementation last time you tried. These techniques may take awhile to become effective, but keep in mind, the longer the behavior has been evident, the longer it will take to change it.

Behaviors also can change over time. New ones appear in the place of old. Those skills you learned in the past might be more applicable to what you find concerning you today.

### BEHAVIOR IS:

- Any action that can be seen or heard.
- Communication: Negative behavior arises from stress/fear.

Questions we want to ask ourselves when a child has behaviors:

- What's underneath the behavior?
- What is he/she afraid of?
- What need is going unmet (current/past)?
- What can I do RIGHT NOW to strengthen our relationship?

### Responding to a Child's Behavior:

The new *Parenting Skills Training* (PST) makes a big distinction between **RESPONDING** and **REACTING** to what children do. Sometimes, especially when we've been successful in raising our own children, our tendency is to parent all children in the same way.

All of the children who come into our homes have suffered some type of trauma. The experience has affected how they see the world, how they see caregivers and how they see themselves. Trauma impacts their development and their behavior.

Trauma also makes it hard for children to feel safe and to trust. Most of the children in our care come to us feeling threatened—particularly by those they otherwise might turn to for help. Children are often afraid of getting close to a caregiver because they have learned that to do so may hurt.

Let's talk about one of the biggest challenges as a foster parent: *Responding* to a child's behavior rather than *reacting* to it.

**Responding means:**

- A parent must approach the child with the aim of understanding what the child does rather than simply reacting.
- It doesn't mean accepting the child's behavior. Instead, it means accepting the child while working through the behavior.
- A parent should set limits to wrong behavior, while making sure that we continue to care about the child who does the behavior.

When we *respond*, we can help a child through the shame that trauma produces. Even though it is not a child's fault that he/she was maltreated, the child often feels responsible in some way. Because the abuse, neglect or other damage was done to the child, not to someone else, in their mind they think, "there must be something about me that makes bad things happen to me." In some way, the child feels he/she is at least partly to blame.

When we *respond*, our behavior helps hurt children move toward recovery.

**When you see a behavior that concerns you:**

**Reflect:**

- Identify how you are feeling before reacting.
- Stop, take a deep breath.
- Listen to what your child's behavior is saying to you. This will lead you to the child's need.

**Relate** to the emotional state of the child. Until you can identify your own true emotional state, you should not ask your child how he/she is feeling. BE PRESENT!

**Regulate**

- Decrease chaos
- Predict what will happen for your children
- Identify transitions--plan for them
- Role of touch—time in vs. time out

- Use calm and soothing music in your home
- Provide containment in the home

Your child will learn from your modeling more than your words! This is a process whereby an individual learns a skill through observation and imitation.

Set your child up for success. If s/he is having a difficult day, be sure to end on a positive note. You can do this by requesting a skill the child has already mastered and then delivering some nice verbal praise.

### **Tips For Parents:**

**DO RESPOND, DON'T REACT-** you always have the option of walking away from an interaction that is escalating or becoming a power struggle rather than a conversation.

**DO PUT RELATIONSHIP BEFORE CONTROL-** don't be more negative than positive. Beware of getting caught up in power struggles. Be sure that any consequences are appropriate to the behavior rather than your own need to win.

**DO CREATE A SENSE OF SAFETY-** Learning is enhanced by trust and safety. It is undermined by fear and anxiety.

**DO FORGIVE AND FORGET**

**DO EXPLAIN AND GIVE REASONS-** reasons help create internal rules to follow. Don't insist on confessions. Confessions can create resentment and humiliation and increase the likelihood of lying to avoid consequences.

**BE CONSISTENT-** if you are responsive and consequences are fair, follow through. Always be willing to talk, since discussion and negotiation are skills we want to model and teach. Be strong and be kind.

**LISTEN AND GIVE CHOICES** — listen actively to your child. This sets a good example and helps the child feel important and valued. Listening leaves a door open to communication. Remember, if you do not want your child to tune you out, do not tune out your child.

**GIVE CHILD CHORES** — keep the chore appropriate and keep clear guidelines as to who will do what and when. Select one or two chores and be prepared that it will also take your time. Calm reminders may be necessary to get those chores done. Parents who share duties and chores with their child help to build self-discipline and a sense of responsibility.

**HELP YOUR CHILD REMEMBER** — many children are distractible and forgetful. Keep a short list of tasks. A list is impersonal, and your child will gain satisfaction as he checks off those tasks he completes. Use picture cues, a prominently placed calendar

or environmental reminders (i.e., after supper, feed the dog; when sister brings the dishes, you load the dishwasher). These techniques are memory boosters.

**AVOID A POWER STRUGGLE OVER REPEATED DIRECTIONS** — give a reminder one to three times, as needed, but say it each time as though it were the first. Speak clearly and slowly, use a gentle touch, make good eye contact and keep an encouraging expression. After you have stated your wish in a simple and clear manner, ask your child to repeat what was said. As soon as the child does what was asked, simply say, "Thank you, I appreciate your doing what I asked." One of the most potent motivations is a verbal response, indicating your pride and acceptance of the child's efforts.

**HELP YOUR CHILD ORGANIZE** — many youngsters are erratic in their approach to problem solving and present themselves as being very disorganized. They may have great difficulty relating an event in its proper sequence. Keep a calm, structured and predictable home existence. Be firm and consistent about routine chores and schedules for meals, homework, bedtime, etc. Routines and schedules help your child accept order and become more predictable. Minimize distractions and provide a place, a time and the tools for a task's completion. Help them know where to begin, when to end and how to express who, what, when and where. Again, a calm, uncritical manner should be the rule.

**AVOID FATIGUE** — when children are tired, their self-control breaks down. Rest, relaxation and regular routine are particularly needed for children.

**ACCEPT YOUR CHILD'S LIMITATIONS, RECOGNIZE STRENGTHS AND HELP OTHERS DO THE SAME** —since many behaviors are not intentional, do not expect to completely eliminate them — just try to teach reasonable control. Nothing is more helpful for a child than having a tolerant low-key family who respects the child and allows the child to respect himself.

**USE CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS**— avoid negative comments. Do not assume that child can understand. "Put the clothes in the dryer, then you can watch TV, or the TV will be turned off." Define what a "clean room" is or what "be good in the store" means. The child can direct himself toward appropriate behavior if someone helps him understand what is expected.

**PERIODICALLY GET AWAY FROM IT ALL** — parents must take time away from their child often enough to recharge. Coping with some of these children for 24 hours a day can be very stressful. Families must get through the difficult times without being torn apart. It is important to protect the basic relationships in your family. Learn to maintain a balanced point of view. Separate the essential issues from the non-essential ones. Be as calm as possible, do not overreact, keep your eye on the future, and, most importantly, get every ounce of energy from your sense of humor.

Understanding Trauma:

Complex developmental trauma: The term complex developmental trauma describes the children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development. This can also be described as profound chronic caretaker failure.

The underdeveloped brain at birth organizes and grows in a sequential fashion-starting from the lowest regulatory regions (e.g. heart rate and blood pressure) of the brain and proceeding through the higher parts of the brain responding for more complicated functions (e.g. planning, impulse, control, and abstract thought) Therefore, early trauma, including parental separation, early neglect and abuse, all damage and dysregulation effect the more the basic and regulatory parts of the brain. This damage, in turn, impairs the development of higher brain functions.

How Trauma effects the body:

- Brain and Nerves- Headaches, feelings of despair, lack of energy, sadness, nervousness, anger, irritability, increased or decreased eating, trouble concentrating, memory problems, trouble sleeping, mental health problems such as panic attacks, and depression.
- Skin-Acne and other skin problems.
- Muscles and joints-Muscle aches and tension, increased risk of bone density.
- Heart- Faster heartbeat, rise in blood pressure.
- Stomach- Nausea, stomach pain, heartburn, weight gain.
- Pancreas- Increased risk of diabetes.
- Intestines- Diarrhea, constipation, and other digestive problems.
- Immune system- Lowered ability to fight infection from illness.
- Other physical and emotional responses to trauma- Shock, denial, disbelief Anger, irritability, mood swings, Feeling sad and hopeless, Confusion, Anxiety, fear, withdrawal, disconnected, Insomnia, nightmares Being easily startled Racing heartbeat Aches and pains Fatigue, difficulty concentrating Edginess and agitation.

Cortisol and how it effects behavior:

- Cortisol is a biomarker for stress.
- A hormone produced by the adrenal glands in response to acute and chronic stress.

- People exposed to chronic environmental stress tend to have elevated levels of cortisol.
- High cortisol levels inhibit the growth and repair of the brain cells and increases vulnerability to other neurological insults.
- Elevated cortisol levels in the body correspond to poorer cognitive functioning in six areas- Language, processing speed, eye hand coordination, executive functioning, verbal memory, and visual memory and learning.
- Long term effects of elevated cortisol include difficult behaviors, mental health problems, sleep difficulties and school problems.

**What you can do:**

- Understand the role of breathing- Create mindfulness for you and your child.
- Acknowledge that we make poor word choices when our pulse rises above 100 beats per minute. Practice awareness.
- Be patient; this will take time.
- **Work on brain development through proximity-**
  - bilateral activities- popping bubbles with both hands, pull paper apart with both hands, jumping and clapping, skipping, air bike, follow the leader, juggle scarves, drumming, wheelbarrow, animal walking.
  - Proprioceptive activities-Oral motor toys, bubble gum, chair sit-ups, chair push-ups, hanging on monkey bars, wall push-ups, pushing box across room.
  - Vestibular activities- Swinging on swing, mini trampoline, slow rocking, spinning, log rolling, jungle gym play,
  - Rhythmical movement- Rocking chair, swinging.
  - Deep pressure- Wrapped snugly in a blanket, carrying or pushing heavy books, weighted blankets, vacuuming, shoveling, digging, dusting, kneading clay.
  - Oral motor input- chew on straws, suck on hard candy, eat beef jerky.
- Rehearse with your child; predict your day activities.
- Predict transitions.
- Balance your child's day.
- Avoid overload.

- Practice good nutrition:
  - Children need to eat regular balanced meals and snacks so that the blood sugar levels remain consistent and steady.
  - Snacks should contain a balance of protein and complex carbohydrates.
- Physical activities.
  - Let them go up the slide the wrong way
  - ride a bike, basketball, jumping, sit and spin.
- Avoid over-exhaustion- neurotransmitters will deplete and behavior will deteriorate.
- Art of any kind, music soothes, silence can also be powerful.
- Let your child run- give them a place to run to (Cortisol goes down and serotonin goes up)
- Plan sensory activities every 2 hours (rice or bean trays, sand, play-doh, baking, water activities).
- Chew gum- up to 5 pieces of bubble gum encourages sensory input.
- High protein snacks before bed
- Laugh, play and touch.
- Simplify
- Taking care of yourself helps you be more regulated-
  - Eat right- Value protein, avoid simply carbohydrates, avoid diet sodas and artificial sweeteners, avoid food dyes.
  - Exercise, Get plenty of sleep, Drink lots of water.

Work on Parenting the PEACEFUL way-

P-Patient

E-Empathic

A-Accepting

C-Compassionate

E-Encouraging

F-Fun and Forgiving

U-Understanding

L-Loving

6 steps to creating the therapeutic environment

-Mindfulness

-Understanding

-Awareness

-Time-in

-Containment

-10-20-10 spend 10 minutes with each child in the morning 20 in the afternoon and 10 before bed.

The importance of communication-

-To truly communicate use your eyes, smile, touch, music of your voice and the consistency of your actions.

-Get down on the floor and make sure your eye contact is level with the child, Don't always make the child gaze up to make eye contact.

-Become a play-by-play announcer, show your child how to use words. Put words into actions feelings and thoughts. Narrate your actions to young children.

-Our actions do communicate more than our words.

-Words never replace nonverbal communication.

-All too often we confuse children by presenting inconsistency between the words and the actions. How often have we answered "maybe" to a child's request when we mean "no".

Helping children through difficult feelings and actions-

-Common reactions for ages 3-6:

Tantrums, crying, irritability, struggles to understand in concrete ways, anger aggression, regression, withdrawal, disturbance in sleep.



-What you can do or say:

Give verbal reassurance, give physical comfort, use simple direct words or phrases, Maintain consistent and familiar routines, give your child tangible items to provide them security, draw, paint.

-Common reactions for ages 9-12:

-anger aggression, confusion, sense of shame, self-destructive behavior, withdrawal, difficulty concentrating.

-What you can do or say:

-offer honest direct answers, offer physical outlets, create opportunities to talk, spend one-on-one time, validate feelings. Expressive art.

-Common reactions for ages 13-18:

-Feeling angry and powerless, sadness, anxiety, depression, conflicted about loyalty to family, sense of loss, self destructive behaviors, physical complaints, difficulties in school.

-What you can do or say:

Be honest, reassure them, be consistent, support positive peer friendships, identify supportive adults they can talk to, maintain open communication.

### **Building healthy relationships**

We need to build strong, supportive relationships with the children in our care- to connect emotionally with them. This will not happen easily or overnight. It also won't happen accidentally. We will need to work on creating real connections. While it will not be easy with all children, there are things we can do to help make it happen. One is to make a daily connection with each child.

A high praise low criticism rate combined with quality one-on-one parent-child can have powerful effects on children's feelings, attitudes, and behavior. It can be helpful to keep a daily connection chart to monitor what you are doing to build your relationship each day.

Oxytocin is a naturally occurring hormone in the brain. It is a learned response from birth and most likely beginning in utero. When the infant is upset and the parent soothes the infant thereby teaching the oxytocin response. In time we learn to have the response during simple interactions like making eye contact, simple touching, sharing a hug or a laugh. Though it is nature, it must be taught. Children and adults who have experienced a lot of early stress and trauma typically have not learned to release it effectively or sufficiently, thereby finding themselves not as easily calmed or excited about sustained relationships as they

might otherwise be. It is the essential hormone that permits us to enjoy life, be healthy, thrive, connect, feel calm, be in relationships.

To build healthy positive relationships with the children in your home you need to build an environment conducive to oxytocin. This is an environment free from shame, guilt, consequences and feelings of hatred. It is an environment of love, intimacy, acceptance, and understanding. An environment where we lead not from a place of fear and dominance, but rather from patience and influence.

Review- A Trauma informed care approach to understanding behavior  
2 hours

1. Describe a time when you responded instead of reacting?

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2. How do you reflect, relate and regulate in your home?

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3. What Tips for parents were helpful to you?

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What tips do you have to share with other parents?

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4. What does it mean to be trauma informed?

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5. What are some ways you have seen trauma effect the body of children in your home?

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6. How does elevated cortisol effect children?

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7. Describe sensory tools or activities you use in your home?

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8. What changes have you made in your home in the last year to create a therapeutic environment?

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9. What are some difficult feelings, or behaviors you have seen in your home in the last year?

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How have you responded?

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10. Why is communication important?

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11. What different types of communication do you use?

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12. What did you learn from this section?

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Primary Foster Parent

Date

Review- A Trauma informed care approach to understanding behavior  
2 hours

13. Describe a time when you responded instead of reacting?

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14. How do you reflect, relate and regulate in your home?

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15. What Tips for parents were helpful to you?

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What tips do you have to share with other parents?

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16. What does it mean to be trauma informed?

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17. What are some ways you have seen trauma effect the body of children in your home?

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18. How does elevated cortisol effect children?

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19. Describe sensory tools or activities you use in your home?

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20. What changes have you made in your home in the last year to create a therapeutic environment?

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21. What are some difficult feelings, or behaviors you have seen in your home in the last year?

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How have you responded?

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22. Why is communication important?

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23. What different types of communication do you use?

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24. What did you learn from this section?

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Secondary Foster Parent

Date