

## Making a Positive Difference

Sometimes, it's just a day gone wrong. Other times, it feels like you're in a parenting rut. When we're out of ideas, patience, and creativity, it feels lonely and overwhelming to parent someone whose behaviors are challenging.

If you find yourself repeating phrases to children in your home that your parents told you growing up, you're not alone. We learned most of our parenting techniques and discipline skills from our parents.

Unfortunately, many of those techniques don't seem to work well with children and youth who have histories of stress, trauma, abuse, and/or neglect. The good news is that that our parenting skills can grow and change—and after all, isn't growth what we're expecting from the kids in our care, too?

### Tracking Behaviors

When things feel out of control, we're often looking for that magic answer. One tangible thing that might help you is to learn about specific triggers and feelings of the youth in your care.

Sometimes the best way to do this is to take a notebook and write down simple observations throughout the day. By taking notice, you might gain some objective insights instead of reacting in the moment.

Some other things you might want to pay attention to include:

*Discipline means to teach.  
But if you're stressed, you  
can't teach until both you  
and the child in your care  
are calm.*

- When did the children follow through with your requests?
- Are there certain times of the day or places when they *don't* follow through with your requests?
- Are there any unmet care needs (food, sleep) that they may have at specific times of the day?

- What triggers them to have a negative response?
  - When do they become overwhelmed?
  - How much stress can they handle before acting out or displaying behaviors?
- Also check out our tip

sheet, *The Importance of Documentation*.

### Know yourself

Self-awareness begins by knowing and understanding how our values can effect the interactions we have with children in our care. Knowing how you feel in response to specific behaviors can give you more parenting tools.

- What do you value and why?
- How did your family solve problems, make decisions, and incorporate discipline when you were growing up?
- What behaviors do you find the most challenging and how do they make you feel?
- What life experiences have youth in your care experienced that you find difficult to understand?
- What do you look like when you first start to become

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stressed and overwhelmed?

- What do you look like when you reach your boiling point and how long does it take for you to settle back down? (Refer to the *Reaching Your Boiling Point* tip sheet.)

Do any of your answers surprise you? Maybe the kids in your care already know some of the answers to these questions. Your life experiences do have an impact on your parenting skills and it's important to understand how our history and values can impact us as adults.

Sometimes it isn't just the kids' behaviors that parents find challenging, but rather how the their behaviors can trigger feelings in yourself. If the kids are in therapy, hopefully you have a good rapport with their therapists so you can occasionally talk about how your own stress meshes with your children's.

### Why Stress Matters

Stress is the reaction we have to a threat, both real and imagined, that makes us respond in a certain way. When we become frightened by something and jump, or become sad and have tears involuntarily roll down our cheeks, those are stress reactions.

When children with a background of trauma have a reaction to a particular stressor, they are reacting, not thinking. Because most of us, as parents, were raised without the kind of stress many kids in care have, we forget that the child may be reacting to something that happened in the past. We in turn often revert to *our* past and give them a consequence because that's how we were raised.

However, that doesn't always seem to work to well with children and teens in care who have histories of being easily overwhelmed with stress and trauma. In fact, some foster parents report that the behaviors of a child in care actually seem to get worse when they give consequences to negative behaviors.

That's because adding a consequence can make the child feel even more overwhelmed, which usually results in more severe behaviors. Or sometimes the child shuts down completely.

### What Can You Do?

So what can you do instead of giving a consequence for a negative behavior?

- Try to figure out what the kids are really trying to tell you when they're acting out. Behavior is communication—why are they acting out?
- What can you do to connect with them instead?
- Take a time-out for yourself in order to calm down and then come back to the situation.
- Realize that when the children in your care are stressed, they cannot learn. Discipline doesn't work until everyone is calm and can learn.
- Just breathe—either alone or with the child—until both of you are calm again.
- Apologize when you're wrong. While it's often hard to do, how else are kids going to learn to admit they're wrong if they don't see us also doing it?
- Learn to read body language and be more aware of your own body language.
- Meet the kids where they're at, instead of where you're at.
- Be sensitive to possible sensory issues such as lighting, smells, and noises.
- While it's a lot of pressure at times, remember that everything you do is modeling a behavior, so try to focus on modeling positive responses.

And one of the most important things you can do is to change your expectations and start celebrating the successes, no matter how small.

### Elements of Positive Discipline

Discipline means to

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teach. But if you're stressed, you can't teach until both of you are calm.

Don't forget to bring your sense of humor! Sometimes all it takes is laughing a little more often or learning to see the humor in a situation. It's okay to back down and start smiling or laughing (at yourself) in the middle of an argument. And like apologizing, it's a great way for kids to learn this technique once they see you using it.

Listening to the kids in your care is key, and shows them that you respect them. Here are some other things you can do that might show kids that you respect them.

- Give choices as much as possible. This helps give youth a sense of control over something and gives them the opportunity to learn how to make decisions. Also allow them to make mistakes with some choices—e.g., how to spend their allowance, what to wear according to the weather, etc. Natural consequences take the pressure away from you having to lecture.
- Catch the children in your care following rules and praise them for the specific behavior. While it seems obvious, this often still challenges the best of us when we're stressed. When you give attention for positive behaviors, the negative behaviors go down.
- Create a behavior chart focused on an easily accomplishable task. This will give kids success to build upon, increase



self-esteem, and they will learn how to complete a task. For some good examples, go to:

<https://www.verywell.com/get-the-most-out-of-behavior-modification-charts-3883077>.

- Use redirection—focusing on something else. Try going for a walk, a drive, changing the subject, cooking, telling a funny joke that has nothing to do with what you're doing, etc.
- Use “When/Then.” Start small. *When you finish dinner, then you can watch TV.*
- Connect before you correct—teachable moments are based on the relationship. Pay attention to both your stress and the

youth's stress level before coming back to connect.

- Validate the youth's feelings and worries.
- All of us need to feel like we belong and are important. Frequently remind the youth in your care how important they are and how positively they impact your

family.

- Keep a shared journal. When it seems like everything you say seems to turn to an argument, try keeping a journal (with no lectures or reprimands) that you share.
- Transitions and change are just plain difficult, regardless of age. Prepare kids in advance of transitions using time, pictures, cues and/or verbal descriptions.

Regardless of what happened during the day today, tomorrow is a fresh start for both you and the youth in your care. When you're experiencing difficult

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times, remind yourself that you *are* making a positive difference—even if the progress seems painfully slow.



**Resources Available from the FCARC Library**

Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control, (Book) by Heather T. Forbes, LCSW & B. Bryan Post, PhD, LCSW

Positive Parenting I , II, III, (DVDs) by Dr. R. Delaney

Positive Discipline: Without Shaking, Shouting, or Spanking (DVD)

Behavior Management using Supportive Control, (Book) by Vera Fahlberg

**Other Resources**

**101 Positive Principles of Discipline**, by Katharine C. Kersey, Ed.D.

**Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Family Care Providers**, by Cornell University

**Off Road Parenting: Practical Solutions for Difficult Behavior**, by Caesar Pacifici, Ph.D., Patricia Chamberlain, Ph.D., and Lee White



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