

Adopting and Fostering Children from Hard Places

Fact Sheet: Compassion and Behavioral Intervention

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Children from hard places tend to be disconnected kids. Many of them are operating under a heavy burden of developmental delays, impairments, deep shame, and lingering trauma. In negotiating conflicts and impasses with these children, parents need to understand that old-school "spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child" disciplinary techniques simply won't work. In almost every case traditional responses such as spankings, lectures, threats, bribes, and "time-outs" have to be tossed aside in favor of new, more creative and constructive forms of discipline. The ultimate goal is to draw the child into a circle of safety and security, disarm his defenses, and help him re-connect.

Children of Trauma: A Profile. If you've taken the step of adopting or fostering a child with a history of chronic maltreatment, physical, mental, or emotional neglect or abuse, or early separation from his birth parents, chances are good that you're dealing with a child who:

- Has experienced dramatic upheavals in terms of his sense of trust, self-esteem, and self-efficiency.
- Labors under a burden of confused thoughts and emotions regarding the nature of family and the meaning of loss.
- Has survived harsh circumstances by developing maladaptive survival strategies and skills.
- Has suffered significant interruptions to normal brain development, alterations in brain chemistry, and an impairment of his ability to process and respond to sensory information.

In short, you're faced with a stiff challenge and a high calling. You've been given the task of nurturing a fragile and malleable human being whose brain, central nervous system, body chemistry, and entire outlook on life have been dramatically impacted by a series of profoundly abnormal circumstances. Children who fit this profile generally come from a handful of similar and potentially interrelated background scenarios. There are six major risk factors to be aware of:

1. Stressful pregnancy
2. Difficult birth
3. Early hospitalization
4. Abuse
5. Neglect
6. Trauma

Parenting Job Number One: Compassion. If you're going to parent this child successfully, the first thing you need to do is make a concerted effort to understand what

she is going through. Parents in your position have to learn how to think in terms of the shock, loss, and grief children experience when they leave a familiar environment—however horrific that environment may have been—in order to come home to a new family. In other words, genuine *compassion* has to be your touchstone. If you have enough information and enough imagination to put yourself inside the child’s head and see the world through *her* eyes, you may find yourself developing an entirely new approach to some of her more aggravating and mystifying behavior patterns. It can help to remember that “misbehavior” always has a purpose, and that in most cases it’s really a thinly disguised cry for help.

Meeting the Challenge. When it comes to raising kids from hard places, the *bad news* and the *good news* are the same: the human brain is *plastic*, and as a result it can always reorganize itself, whether to deal with danger and trauma or to adapt to a new environment of safety and trust. Past hurts *can* be healed. Broken relationships *can* be mended. Undesirable behavior patterns *can* be reversed. It’s never too late to become *connected* in a healthy way. It just takes diligence, determination, and hard work on the part of the parent who wants to see it happen. Here are some thoughts and suggestions to get you moving in the right direction:

- First, understand the importance of taking a *holistic* approach. Think globally instead of focusing on isolated symptoms. Early childhood trauma can be reversed through re-afferent learning, but the process must take the whole child into account and move forward by way of a complete restructuring of his environment. In particular, it should be based on a *developmental model*. A well-known axiom in the field of child development maintains that “recovery of function recapitulates development of function.” In other words, we can help heal the damage done during a child’s early years by starting over at the beginning and “re-doing” the developmental process through an affirming, safe, secure, and loving environment.. Even under ideal circumstances, the human brain requires three years of mentoring to begin to develop normally. Parents of disconnected kids should expect to invest a comparable amount of time in the task of bringing their at-risk children back “online.”
- In connection with this last thought, if you’re a new adoptive parent, bear in mind that you can help your child make a successful transition by planning to stay at home with her as much as possible for a minimum of thirty to forty days (three months would be optimal if you can swing it). During this time, your child’s needs should be the primary focus. By meeting those needs consistently and lovingly, you’ll be helping her settle in for a lifetime and giving her a practical understanding of what it means to be part of a loving forever family.
- Next, take deliberate steps to give your child a *voice*. Make it clear to her that her concerns are heard and acknowledged. Work out compromises so

that she is able to get what she wants at least *some* of the time. Find ways to say *yes* instead of *no*. Make a “big deal” of granting her special requests and meeting her special needs—for example, if she wants a night-light in her room, celebrate the occasion by taking her to the store with you to shop for one. Teach her how to *use words* to make her wishes known. Most important of all, allow her to tell her own story—don’t tell it for her. Come up with creative ways to help her express her feelings. For example, you can facilitate her narrative skills by encouraging her to draw pictures representing her personal history or to act it out in puppet play.

Creative and Constructive Discipline. What’s required in a situation like yours is an entirely new way of thinking about discipline. Rather than relying on traditional disciplinary techniques, which tend to be authoritarian in tone and style, you need to view yourself as your child’s mentor and partner. This means developing an approach that combines *firmness*, *kindness*, and *retraining* with a number of *connecting* (as opposed to *disconnecting*) strategies:

- ***Firmness.*** Begin to think in terms of *graded levels of response*. If your child is defiant, gear your response to meet the level of defiance. A mildly sassy child can be handled with a playful reminder. An aggressive child, on the other hand, should encounter complete conviction from the adult: your body language, voice, and words must all convey that the child’s behavior is unacceptable. Raise the bar of your expectations as high as you think he can handle, and no higher. When problems arise, respond quickly. Take a deep breath, plant your two feet slightly apart so that you can feel the ground solidly beneath you, lower your voice, and speak firmly. Achieve eye-to-eye contact and clarify your expectations. Offer simple choices and present consequences. In every situation, strive for an: [IDEAL Response© Immediate, Direct, Efficient, Action-based, and Leveled at Behavior not the child.](#)
- ***Kindness.*** Even when you have to be firm and enforce rules, it’s vital to remain respectful of your child as a person and mindful of his impairments. In all cases, strive to finish every corrective interaction on a positive note. “Sandwich” corrective statements between affirming and connective statements. It’s a good idea to aim for a ratio of *five* positive statements for every negative message.
- ***Retraining.*** When your child misbehaves or defies your authority, take him back to the “scene of the crime” and give him a chance to “do it over” again correctly. Re-do’s give children an opportunity to *practice* new behavior in a fun and playful way while building self-esteem through success. The beauty of a re-do is that it catches an inappropriate action in progress and says, “Whoa! Let’s try that again!” By actively replacing misbehavior with correct behavior you can help your child encode competency in his memory banks. A re-do can be as simple or complex as needed. As many doors as it took your child to go off course, that’s

how many you have to revisit. At each step, praise him by saying something like, “Good job doing it right this time!”

- *Connecting vs. Disconnecting Strategies.* Because children from hard places tend to be *disconnected* children, it’s important to make sure that we don’t discipline them in ways that only aggravate their feelings of isolation and alienation. Many “traditional” methods of discipline tend to do precisely this. Consider the following series of contrasting pairs:
 1. *Proximity vs. “Banishment.”* Choose methods of correction that bring the child *closer* to you instead of pushing him away. Rather than isolating him in a “time-out,” keep him by your side in a specially designated “think-it-over-place”—a location near to you and the rest of the family yet free from distraction where he can ponder his behavior and its consequences. When he’s ready to talk, get down on his level and ask him to describe what he did wrong. Then say, “How can you do it right?”
 2. *Problem-Solving vs. Lectures and Sermons.* Lecturing gives the wrong message: namely, that parents are always good and the child is always bad. It puts up a wall of separation between parent and child. Lecturing feeds a child’s inner sense of hopelessness, and many children who were adopted or in foster care arrive with a core of deep shame already installed. Instead of sermonizing and reading the riot act, work *with* your child to hammer out compromises and solutions acceptable to the entire family.
 3. *Words vs. Punitive Measures.* If a child comes from an abusive background, it stands to reason that, for him, any kind of physical punishment is just a throwback to the distress and trauma of the past. A spanking might temporarily make him comply with your wishes, but it won’t build a sense of trust and connection between the two of you, which is what he most desperately needs. In place of punishments, use words to make your wishes known to the child, to ensure that he understands your expectations, and to arrange a “re-do” when the standard has been violated.
 4. *Resolution vs. Consequences.* The aim of disciplinary action is not to see to it that the child gets his “just desserts.” It’s to restore unity and harmony to the parent-child relationship. In any interaction of this kind, your goal should be the realization of three crucial outcomes: 1) *corrected* behavior; 2) *contentment* on the part of all concerned; and 3) *connection* between parent and child.
 5. *Advocacy vs. Adversarial Stance.* Whatever you do, don’t put yourself in the position of being an enemy to your child. Look for ways to take her part, give her the benefit of the doubt, and run interference for her in

difficult situations. Try to see the world through *her* eyes. Become her advocate at school, at church, in the neighborhood, and wherever there are people who don't understand the special challenges faced by kids who have suffered the effects of complex trauma.

6. *Focus on the Child's Preciousness vs. Focus on Failures.* Never cease to let your child know that he is loved with an unconditional love. When he's angry, defiant, or unhappy, stand with him in front of the mirror and help him to see himself through *your* eyes. Tell him, "I understand who you are, I know where you've come from, and I love you."

Further Thoughts: The Value of Playful Interaction. Whenever confronting undesirable behavior in children, remember that it's always best to adopt a light-hearted, playful approach if you can possibly manage it. Frightened, disconnected kids from hard places don't know how to play with abandon. You can set the healing process in motion by helping them move in this direction. When you think you've tried everything else, play may provide the missing link. Here are some of its most obvious benefits.

- Play disarms fear, builds connectedness, practices social skills, and teaches competencies for life. Spontaneous, undirected play is the most powerful in this regard.
- Play provides structure, challenge, nurture, and engagement with other people.
- Play teaches children to self-regulate levels of arousal and calibrate their own reactions to external stimuli.

If you need help applying these thoughts and suggestions to your family's situation, you may want to enlist the assistance of a trained Christian counselor who specializes in family attachment therapy. Choose a therapist who makes a point of working with *parent and child* together within the context of a *family systems* approach. Therapy sessions should only be a jumping-off point for the work you'll be doing with your child at home. In between visits with the counselor, partner with your child by helping him interpret and verbalize his past history and present experiences in meaningful words. Your family pediatrician may be able to recommend a suitable practitioner. If not, Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide referrals to qualified individuals practicing in your area—feel free to call us Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time at 800-A-FAMILY (800-232-6459). You may also be able to find the resources you need by visiting the Web site of the TCU Institute of Child Development [www.child.tcu.edu].

Resources

Books

Karyn B. Purvis, Ph.D., David R. Cross, Ph.D., and Wendy Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child*.

Daniel Siegel, *Parenting From the Inside Out*.

Milan and Kay Yerkovich, *How We Love Our Children*.

DVDs

Karyn Purvis, Ph. D., *Empowering, Connecting, and Correcting Principles* (TCU Institute of Child Development).

Karyn Purvis, Ph. D., *The Neurochemistry of Fear* (TCU Institute of Child Development)

Karyn Purvis, Ph. D., *A Sensory World* (TCU Institute of Child Development)

Karyn Purvis, Ph. D., *Playful Interaction* (TCU Institute of Child Development)

Web Sites

www.neuroresearch.org

www.neurorelief.org