

**FOSTERING
DIFFERENCE**

GUIDE TO BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

Understanding the Meaning Of Your Childs Behaviour

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***The sign of great parenting is not the
child's behaviour.***

***The sign of truly great parenting is the
parent's behaviour***

Acknowledgment:

This resource is part of a series of resources for foster parents who are raising children living with developmental difference caused by early life adversity. The guides are intended to provide general educational information only, and are not a substitute for professional assessment and intervention.

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A Guide to Behaviour Management

All children have challenging behaviour from time to time. Even a child who is reasonable most of the time will have days or moments where their behaviour is challenging. This might be when they are tired or feeling particularly stressed. It is generally accepted that while all children will go through periods where they misbehave; in most instances their behaviour doesn't reach a level that impacts on their ability to take part in normal everyday activities. Children with Developmental Difference can show behaviour that challenges and this often becomes problematic for the child because of how it affects their social relationships and schooling.

But when is a child's behaviour considered problematic?

When a child's behaviour precludes them from accessing normal community activities or schooling then it is problematic and needs to be addressed. If left unaddressed, challenging behaviour of this degree can have a major impact on children's educational and social opportunities. To ensure the best environment for children's development, we need to make sure that we are getting the right support in place to help the child to behave in a way that their peers, their school and their society find acceptable (at least most of the time!).

An effective approach gives you the tools to meet your child's needs while at the same time teaching them what behaviour you want from them.

As a foster parent, I'm sure you receive plenty of advice about managing challenging behaviour. So what should you look for when considering which behaviour management technique to adopt? You should look for an approach that gives you the tools to meet your child's needs, while strengthening your relationship with your child; and at the same time teaching your child what behaviour you want them to aspire to. The best outcomes are achieved in the context of having a respectful relationship with your child, while conveying clear expectations, and teaching the skills needed to meet these expectations.



There are some key principles to apply when addressing behaviour that challenges.

Children's behaviour is influenced by both their biological makeup - 'nature' -and their life experiences -'nurture'. For some children 'nature' factors will be more influential. These include their genetic makeup, temperament and prenatal exposure to alcohol or other substances. For other children, 'nurture' factors are more important. These include poor early care giving and traumatic life experiences such as abuse that result in poor coping strategies. For most fostered children, there will be a combination of 'nature' and 'nurture' factors at play. Later in this resource, the main reasons for challenging behaviour are described.

There are some key principles that apply to addressing behaviour that challenges; irrespective of what drives the behaviour. These principles are outlined next.

1. Decide if you are dealing with a RULE or an expectation

It can be useful for you to be clear about the difference between **rules** and your **expectations**. Behaviour '**rules**' should be directly related to safety in the home or school. An example of a rule might be to 'hold a adults hand when crossing the road'. This is an example of a negotiable safety behaviour that you absolutely must ensure your child complies with. Since this is a safety issue, it is appropriate to make it a rule that your child must hold an adults hand at all times. Behaviour rules relate to behaviours that keep a child safe and are always non-negotiable.

This can be contrasted with your **expectations** of your child's behaviour. Children entering foster care may not have had the opportunity to learn many of the behaviours that we might take for granted. For example, you might have an expectation that your child say 'please' and 'thank you'. If your child has been living in a home where manners weren't valued; they may not have had the opportunity to develop these social behaviours. It is better to think of 'manners' as something that you help your child work towards- an expectation or goal, rather than a non-negotiable rule. Before addressing your child's behaviour, ask yourself whether you are dealing with a rule or an expectation.

2. Choose your BATTLE!

It is most effective to focus on only one behaviour at a time; and selectively ignore others. There is no hard and fast rule about which behaviour to address; but we generally prioritise behaviours that place your child or others at risk (behaviours that threaten safety). Otherwise, focus your energy on improving the behaviours that will improve your child's life opportunities; or change the way you feel about this child.



If you are dealing with a safety RULE first, remember to state a rule clearly in terms of what you want the child to do to keep safe (rather than what you don't want them to do). An example might be "We always walk on the footpath" rather than "Don't go on the road".

If you are dealing with a behavioural Expectation first, then your next decision will be which of these expectations to address first. It can be helpful to select the behaviour that is most important to you and that will make the most impact on your child and your relationship. Consider how much the behaviour is affecting social and educational opportunities for your child. How much does this behaviour affect you and your family? It is important to weigh up which behaviours are causing the most difficulty for your child; and which affect you emotionally. These will all be important factors in deciding which behaviour to tackle first. Once you have decided on a behaviour that needs to be addressed, remember to talk to your child and other significant adults about your decision.

3. Involve your child in setting GOALS & creating solutions

Let your child know what behaviour you are supporting them with and why. Even young children can understand the need to learn new ways of behaving when they are provided with a simple and age appropriate explanation (for example "We are helping you to learn new ways of making friends", or "We are going to practise new things to do when you feel angry"). Your child will be more motivated to change when they are included in conversations and goal setting about their behaviour. Children often come up with creative solutions and alternatives to 'bad' behaviour when given the chance. Ensure you both understand what behaviour needs to change and why.

4. Focus on what your child's behaviour is COMMUNICATING to you.

We know that all behaviour serves some purpose for the child. When you understand what the behaviour is communicating, you can start to develop alternatives for them to use instead of challenging behaviour. Your child will only let go of behaviours when they have alternative ways of behaving that achieve the same goal. Ask yourself 'What does my child need instead, in order to let go of this behaviour?'

For example, a child who has learned that it is unsafe to ask for help may instead tantrum and lash out when faced with a task they think is too difficult. This child would benefit from learning and practising a more socially acceptable way to say they are having difficulty. The goal is to identify an alternative way for your child to get the same result as they have been getting with poor behaviour.



Many children have good insight into their behaviour and the feelings that go with it. Later in this resource, we describe some of the common reasons children use challenging behaviour.

5. Notice the small changes & celebrate SUCCESS!

It's important to notice small changes in behaviour and celebrate these. The reality is that some behaviour issues will take time to resolve; and some may diminish in intensity over time, but may never disappear altogether.

It can sometimes take a while for your child let go of behaviours that have protected them in some way- 'safety behaviours'. Safety behaviours are a way that children learn to protect themselves from overwhelming fear. These behaviours tend to improve over time as a child's feeling of safety grows.

Other behaviours may not improve so much over time. This can be the case for 'brain-based' behaviours related to developmental difference. 'Brain-based' difficulties such as disability, language or learning difficulty, or sensory sensitivities can become less intense if we become better at managing environmental triggers and if we adapt our expectations. But they will not resolve altogether, so it's important to celebrate the small wins.

There is no doubt that supporting a child with a difficult temperament, disability, or challenging behaviours can be exhausting. Few people outside your immediate family may realise how tiring it can be. Most foster carers learn to take life day by day or moment by moment. Some learn to adapt to a new life filled with constant 'ups' and 'downs':

'...You know, you can't be in the station of the rollercoaster ride and watch him ride.....You've got to get in the car and ride with him...'

(Foster Parent of child with developmental disability)

The reality is that sometimes improvements in behaviour are incremental; and it will be important to notice and celebrate these very small gains. It is sometimes only when you look back that you can realise how far you and your child have come. Many foster parents find that keeping a journal is a great way to focus on, and celebrate, small improvements in behaviour each day.



So what are the reasons that children engage in challenging behaviour?

One of the most important questions to ask yourself is what is driving your child's behaviour. It is important to start exploring this as early as possible, even if you find that you change your mind later once you have more information. The assumption that underpins this approach is that all behaviour happens for a reason that makes sense to your child. Once you understand the reason(s) for your child's behaviour it becomes easier to address it by helping your child to develop alternative ways to meet that need.

In the remainder of this resource, we consider some of the ways that challenging behaviours address the needs of children with developmental difference due to early life adversity. You may find it useful to think about each of these causes in turn to see whether it applies to your child. Some of the most common reasons for children's challenging behaviour include:

- Being afraid of feeling unsafe (safety behaviour)
- Regulating the sensory world and bodily sensations (self-regulation)
- Lack of skill or ability to respond in a fast and complex world (skill deficit)
- Needing to manage or control important relationships (managing closeness)

Each of these is described in more detail in the remainder of this resource. These descriptions can be used to help decide which of these reasons are contributing to your child's behaviour. You may also find it useful to read the break out box below for tips on how to talk to your child about their feelings.

Tips for talking to children about their feelings and behaviour

Children tend to respond well if behaviours are '**externalised**'. This means talking about behaviours as though they were something unrelated to, or 'external' to the child; for example saying 'I want to talk about what happens when anger starts to boss you around'.

It can also be helpful to '**normalise**' strong feelings at the same time, for example by saying 'Most kids I know feel sad when people don't do what they promise'.

Most children also find it easier to **choose between two feelings**, rather than find the words themselves to describe their emotions. For example, you can say 'Some children feel sad when that happens, and some children feel angry. Do you feel sad or do you feel angry?'

Giving two choices, externalising and normalising are all strategies that can help to engage children that are not used to talking about their feelings and behaviour.



Once you have some understanding of your child's behaviour you can then begin the process of talking about alternative behaviours that might work as well to meet the child's needs. It will also be important to let other significant people in your child's life know about what you have learned, and what behaviours you have decided to practice.

Recognising and understanding SAFETY behaviours



SAFETY BEHAVIOUR

“I’m afraid” or “I don’t like it” and “I don’t know to tell you!”

A safety behaviour is any behaviour that happens when the child feels afraid; or tries to avoid feeling vulnerable and afraid. Safety behaviour is identified by the extent to which this behaviour results in your child feeling less anxious, more safe and calm. Safety behaviour is directly related to a child's experience of fear to any degree; from mild apprehension to absolute terror. Safety behaviours can also arise in situations where the child fears being humiliated or feeling ashamed.

A SAFETY behaviour is any behaviour that happens when your child tries to avoid feeling afraid or vulnerable

Safety behaviours are a powerful means for your child to avoid feeling bad. They are powerfully reinforcing behaviours because your child almost always feels better as a result.

Your child does not have to be in actual danger to engage in safety behaviour. They can be quite safe, but feel afraid. This is usually related to their early life experience. For example, let's say your child



feels afraid to be alone in their bedroom. This fear seems illogical; until you consider your child's past experiences. Your child may associate being alone in a bedroom with extremely fearful events (such as being sexually abused). Although your child is now quite safe; they avoid being alone because in the past it has been an opportunity for sexual abuse to occur.

Your child also doesn't have to remember a fearful event for it to affect them today. Your child can still feel terrified despite the fact that they have no conscious memory about the reasons why. In this case they may not be able to tell you why they feel afraid; just that they do. For these children, feelings of fear just appear to come 'out of the blue'.

Your child can also use safety behaviour to avoid other strong emotions; particularly shame or humiliation. Your child might avoid any activity that risks making him feel anxious or embarrassed; for example talking in front of the class. Any activity that has become associated with feeling anxious or ashamed may be fiercely avoided. Forcing a child to take part in an activity that evokes shame or humiliation is very likely to result in a meltdown. Shame and humiliation are powerful negative emotions that your child will avoid at all costs.

I'm AFRAID and I don't know how to tell you!

The core reason for **safety behaviour** is to ensure that your child avoids any possibility of feeling ashamed, afraid or anxious.

- The core function of safety behaviours is escape or avoidance of unpleasant feelings.
- Safety behaviours can be about avoiding reminders of traumatic and fearful events.
- Safety behaviours can be about avoiding other fearful feelings, including failure, shame or embarrassment.
- Safety behaviours may be action-oriented; where the child 'acts out' by running away or lashing out. These behaviours come from a fight-flight response to perceived danger (see the 'Foster Parents' Guide to Trauma' in this series). Safety behaviours may also take the form of a 'freeze' response to danger (e.g., tuning out, looking spaced-out, dissociation, memory blanks).

How can I help my child to manage safety behaviours?

The aim in addressing safety behaviours is to help your child to make the connection between strong feelings of fear, shame or terror and their escape/avoiding behaviour.



It is important to acknowledge the important protective role that this behaviour has played in your child's life so far. It can be helpful to praise them for developing such successful ways of coping with difficult situations. In this way, you reframe their negative behaviour as a positive survival tool that has been important in their life so far. This reframing is extremely important, because children can feel deeply ashamed of having any feelings of vulnerability. Normalising these feelings is an important part of helping children let go of the need for safety behaviours. It is helpful for you both to think about their behaviour as an important survival tool that was important to your child when they didn't have any other choices.

The first step to addressing safety behaviour is providing your child with words to describe their feelings. Naming and normalising the feeling that is being avoided is the first step to helping children develop alternative coping strategies. The second step is exploring how the avoided activity can be made less fearful for the child. In this step it can be helpful to work out a stepped plan to the feared activity. For example, the child who is afraid to be alone in a bedroom can start out sleeping with a sibling; then in their own bed; then spending increasing time alone in bedroom with light on; before finally spending time in room with lights out. In the last step, you gently encourage your child to find other ways to express their dislike or discomfort in this situation. Make sure you respond to these signals, so your child learns that they have alternative ways they can influence the adults in their life.

If you feel that the behaviour is associated with a more extreme fear (such as reminder of a traumatic event, see description of trauma triggers on next page), try to avoid triggers as much as possible. For example, if child is afraid of bathing alone due to previous abuse, you can negotiate with them what needs to happen to make them feel safe when bathing (e.g., should the door be open or shut?; should an adult be present; not present, or nearby).

One extreme example of safety behaviour relate to avoiding fear is trauma-related behaviour. This can be considered as a special and extreme case of avoidance behaviour that can seem perplexing if not well understood. For a description of trauma response and trauma triggers, see below for more detail.

Trauma Triggers & Safety Behaviour linked with Past Trauma

In many cases, your child's fearful reaction can be extreme and can occur suddenly. Sometimes children can't even tell you what has made them afraid. This happens when children experience trauma triggers. Children can be 'triggered' to re-experience a traumatic event when they see/hear/smell something that reminds them of a past trauma. These sights/sounds/sensations are referred to as 'trauma triggers'-they are powerful reminders of extremely frightening events that 'trigger' a fight or flight fear reaction.



Children can be triggered to re-experience a traumatic event when they see or hear something that reminds them of a past trauma.

Traumatic events have a powerful effect on us all; but are particularly powerful for a child; because they feel more vulnerable and more powerless, and have less experience of coping. Trauma occurs when a child is confronted with an event that threatens their safety or the safety of a loved one (for example sexual abuse; or violence towards their mother). Trauma events trigger a 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Because a child is little, they cannot fight a frightening aggressor; and they cannot run away; a child can only stay and somehow tolerate the event; even if they are simultaneously frozen with fear.

A child may not remember a trauma at all. If they do, it will be remembered in a very different way to a normal childhood memory. When overwhelmed by fear during a traumatic event, a child dissociates the sensory experience from other aspects of the traumatic memory. We are not entirely sure why this happens but the effect is that the sensations of the event (the sights, sounds and bodily feelings) become split from the memory of abuse.

Without support, a child can go on to develop Post traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); in which the child will try to avoid anything that reminds them of the traumatic event- sights, sounds, images in their mind. This becomes a problem when a child encounters something that reminds them of the trauma. They can be 'triggered' to re-experience the trauma.

When this happens the child is re-living and re-experiencing the terror they originally felt, despite the fact that they are now safe. During this 're-experiencing', feelings of terror come flooding back and the child is triggered into a fight, flight or freeze terror reaction. Once triggered, the trauma memory will be re-lived as though the trauma is actually re-occurring in the present moment.

Many apparently harmless events can act as triggers for the traumatised child. A man's hair colour may be a trigger if it is similar to that of an abuser; the colour of a bathroom wall may act as a trigger if it is similar in colour to a room where abuse occurred; even having hugs can act as a trigger and invoke a safety response (fight, flight or freeze). Children may have no conscious memory of their trauma or its triggers. Trauma reactions can be extreme; they often seem to appear 'out of the blue'; and can seem illogical at first. Over time, and with careful observation, you can come to better understand your child's trauma triggers.



Tips for managing safety behaviours

- Normalise feelings of fear and shame- provide your child with an explanation that makes sense of these feelings and how they relate to their past life.
- Teach child about the nature of trauma and hyper-arousal in response to reminders- emphasise that trauma reactions are not their fault.
- Modify the feared activity or event so that your child can tolerate it. This may need to be done in small steps over time.
- Teach child relaxation, calming strategies and coping self-talk to use when affected by fear and anxiety. Examples might include deep breathing and telling themselves they are safe now.
- If trauma triggers are profound, it can be helpful to engage your child in trauma therapy and/or systematic desensitisation regarding trauma. This can be done with professional assistance of a psychologist or psychiatrist.
- Teach your child an alternative way to signal that they are afraid and need support. Make sure you act on these signals and reward your child for using alternative strategies.

Recognising and understanding **SELF-REGULATION** behaviours



SELF REGULATION

“I’m overwhelmed” or “I’m dys-regulated” and “I don’t know how to bring myself back to calm”.



A **self-regulation** behaviour is any behaviour that happens when your child is feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated and is trying to calm and regulate their arousal. This kind of behaviour problem is common in certain childhood disorders (e.g., Autism); but will occur with any child who is sensitive to their environment (see the resource in this series “Foster parents’ guide to Sensory Regulation”). While self-regulation behaviours commonly relate to the sensory environment; children can also experience dysregulation of internal bodily sensations and triggers such as hunger or thirst.

The core reason for self-regulation behaviour is an attempt at self-soothing of dys-regulated emotions, sensory stimulation or body sensations.

- Regulation behaviours can be an attempt to avoid strong emotions and sensations.
- Regulation behaviours can be attempt at self-soothing and calming.
- Regulation behaviours can become more pronounced when your child is tired or unwell.
- Regulation behaviour may be more common in certain sensory environments or in rapidly changing environments.
- Regulation behaviour is more common in certain childhood disorders (e.g., Autism).

A SELF-REGULATION behaviour is any behaviour that happens when your child feels overstimulated & dysregulated

How can I help my child to manage Self-Regulation behaviours?

In managing self-regulation behaviour, the aim is to help young people to understand the link between themselves, their environment and their arousal level. The first step will be helping your child to develop an awareness of what aspects of their surroundings ‘wind them up’ and which are soothing to them. While most difficulties with self-regulation are related to a child’s sensory environment, some children also over or under-respond to ‘internal’ triggers; such as feeling hungry, thirsty, or tired. You may find many of the suggestions in the resources “Foster parents’ guide to sensory regulation difficulties” and “Foster parents’ guide to managing emotions” useful for these children.

It is important to teach children with this kind of difficulty how to manage their sensory environment and its impact on them. Having an awareness of triggers is a useful first step, but it will also be important to learn how to adapt your child’s sensory environment to keep them calm, alert and ready for learning (maintaining optimal arousal levels). The resource in this series entitled “Foster parents’ guide to sensory regulation difficulties” provides examples of how to do this. Encourage your child to view self-regulation skills as an important part of their lives moving forward. Wherever



possible, provide your child with ‘transportable’ self-regulation activities and strategies that can be used across a range of settings without you being present (e.g., fidget toys; chew necklaces; deep muscle exercises).

Children with this difficulty will also need help to regulate their (internal) world; for example feelings of tiredness, hunger or strong emotions. Support your child to make the connection between their emotional states and their behaviour. This might involve coaching them in identifying emotions in themselves and others; and in developing the language to express feelings and internal sensations. Internal ‘states’ such as hunger and thirst can also make many children dys-regulated; they may over-react or under-respond to hunger, thirst and other bodily signals; they may also need to be taught how to discriminate between the various body signals for hunger, thirst, anger and fear.

Emotionally charged events will almost always result in dys-regulation and cause behavioural outbursts in children with this vulnerability. A well-known example of this is the lead up to and aftermath of a child’s visitation with their biological family. This is a time that is ‘predictably unpredictable’ from the child’s point of view. You will almost certainly need to build in regulation strategies to help your child during this time. Consider having a ‘touching-base’ or ‘grounding’ activity with your child on their return to help them to wind themselves down from strong emotions. Depending on the child, this could be a quiet activity (reading, drawing with you or another trusted adult); or it could be a physical activity (shooting hoops, bike riding, trampolining). The type of activity that your child finds calming will depend on their unique make up and sensory needs (see the resource in this series entitled “Foster parents’ guide to Sensory Regulation Difficulties” for suitable strategies).

I’m OVERWHELMED and I don’t know how to calm myself!

Tips for managing self-regulation behaviours

- Teach your child about how the sensory environment affects them. Identify what makes them calm, what winds them up and teach them their sensory preferences.
- Teach your child about emotions; teach feelings words and normalise strong emotions such as sadness and anger. Help your child make the connection between emotions, bodily sensations and external events.
- Teach your child to recognise and discriminate internal body sensations like hunger, thirst and sleepiness. Help them to recognise the connection between internal sensations and their behaviour.



- Help your child to develop self-regulation strategies for handling dys-regulating emotions and sensory stimuli. Develop a range of strategies that your child can use to calm; including some that are ‘transportable’- that can be used when you are not there. This can include coping self-talk, and physical and sensory strategies (see resource on Sensory Difficulties in this series).
- Teach your child to signal when they need to use these strategies and reward them for attempts to use self-regulation strategies.
- Plan for times of emotional or physical stress (transitions, anniversaries and visitations) - think of children’s behaviour as ‘predictably unpredictable’ during these times.

Recognising and understanding **SKILLS-BASED** behaviours



SKILL-BASED DEFICITS

*“I can’t do it” or “I can’t understand”
and “I don’t feel safe to tell you!”*

Skills-based behaviour is behaviour that occurs when your child feels frustrated by demands that exceed their current ability for a range of reasons. Intellectual delay, poor memory, delayed social skills, poor organisation and planning, or language and communication disorders can all contribute to skills-deficit behaviour. Children with any of these difficulties are likely to have delays in the skills that are central to social behaviour; leading to frustration or non-compliance. You can help your child by identifying what skill is missing, and help them to develop it where this is possible.

Most children can be supported to develop better social skills, communication skills, memory and planning (see ‘Foster parents’ guide to Language and Communication Difficulties’ & ‘Foster parents’ guide to Executive Functioning Difficulties’ in this series). If difficulties are substantial; or if brain damage is suspected, then more intensive and specialised support may be needed (see also ‘Foster



parents' guide to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder'). In general, the more areas of development that have been compromised, the more accommodations you will have to make to address behavioural concerns.

We find that behaviour that is due to skills-deficits is more likely to occur in unstructured environments. Children with this kind of difficulty are more likely to cope with highly structured activities and settings in which the expectations are very clear. Familiar friends; familiar activities and small groups may be well tolerated as the social rules are relatively easy to understand. In unstructured, unpredictable environments, however, a child needs to interpret constantly changing information and predict what is expected of them. Unstructured and unpredictable environments place greater cognitive demands on a child with this kind of vulnerability. Behaviour difficulties are more likely in unstructured settings because of the child's difficulty in coping with these environments. Playgrounds, group classroom activities, and 'free play' are all examples of situations that children with a skills-deficit will find extremely challenging.

A SKILLS BASED behaviour is any behaviour that happens when your child feels inadequate & frustrated

The core reason for skills-based behaviour is your child's overwhelming frustration when the demands of the environment exceed their current ability.

- Deficit behaviours can be about lacking the necessary skills to complete what you have asked of them (they don't know how).
- Deficit behaviours can be about not understanding what it is that you have asked of them (they don't know what you want).
- Deficit behaviours are likely to be worse in unstructured situations or where expectations are unclear or rapidly changing.
- Deficit behaviours are more likely in children with intellectual and developmental delay, language and communication difficulties or specific learning issues.
- Deficit behaviours can usually be improved by modifying and clarifying expectations, simplifying interactions, teaching the necessary skills, and providing structure and predictability.
- Deficit behaviours can be improved by teaching your child how to signal that they are not coping or do not understand.



How can I help my child to manage skills-based behaviours?

It can be helpful to maintain a highly structured environment, in which social and behavioural expectations are made clear. Visual, rather than verbal, prompts and reminders make expectations more predictable. It will be important to explicitly teach and model the skills that you want your child to learn and that they are missing. Addressing the 'gaps' in their development provides them with alternatives to poor behaviour. For example, if your child's language skills are delayed they may be frustrated in social situations. You will need to teach them the words they need to say in order to join a group; to ask for help; or give compliments to friends. If your child has an intellectual delay you will need to support them in every area of their development. You will need to teach them missing skills, but will need to break tasks into smaller steps and teach each one. If your child has poor memory for instructions, you may need to use smaller words and smaller sentences, give simplified instructions, and use visual prompts and reminders.

The environment is very important for children with skill deficits. Simplifying the environment and modifying your expectations will be very important factors in supporting these children. The greater the difficulty or delay, the more you will need to adapt the environment and your expectations to suit your child. You can think of it in terms of providing the 'scaffolding' between the young person and the world. Just like scaffolding is used to prop up a building until it is complete, you are the scaffolding that supports your child until such time they can develop the skills they need to succeed.

I CAN'T DO IT and I don't know how to tell you!

Tips for managing skills-based behaviours

- Ensure you understand your child's developmental level in the areas of intellect (memory, attention, learning), language, physical and academic skills.
- Identify areas of delay or difficulty and modify your interactions to suit your child's ability.
- List your child's skill development needs in order of importance and address each one in turn. Do not underestimate the extent to which basic skills (memory, language, spelling, reading and maths) may be missing. Teach missing skills explicitly.
- Teach your child to signal when they are not coping or understanding.



- Modify your expectations and simplify the environment to suit your child's needs. Set your expectations at your child's developmental level. Expect to repeat yourself and expect your child to be slower to learn in areas of delayed development.
- Teach your child the connection between feeling embarrassed, ashamed or inadequate and avoidance behaviour. Teach about the powerful reinforcing effect of avoidance.
- Address feelings of shame and inadequacy directly; normalise these feelings and model appropriate ways to cope with and respond to feeling embarrassed or inadequate.

Recognising and understanding **BOUNDARY** managing behaviours



MANAGING BOUNDARIES

"I need space" or "I need you right now" and "I don't know how to tell you!"

This kind of behaviour is defined by the way it affects the **availability** and **closeness of important people** in the child's life. This kind of behaviour is directed at people who are significant to the young person. Engaging in this behaviour keeps the child feeling protected and safe; by controlling the emotional proximity of significant adults. Some people describe these behaviours as 'attachment' behaviours, because they may have been learned in the child's early attachment relationship.

These behaviours can be extremely perplexing to a foster parent, who may be used to close and intimate relationships, and who finds emotional intimacy rewarding. In contrast, the child who has had difficult early relationships can and can develop these protective behaviours that help them effectively manage the emotional intimacy they experience from adults.

This kind of behaviour is perplexing to foster parents because it can arise suddenly when things appear to be going well. In fact this behaviour often arises *when your child and you are feeling*



especially close. This is because maltreated children have learned that love from an adult is conditional on behaving in a certain way (e.g., being overly demanding or being overly compliant); and true intimacy feels frightening to them.

What is it that triggers this kind of behaviour? 'Normal' caregiving teaches a child that their parent will always respond reliably when they express distress. Maltreated children, however, learn that the only way to guarantee attention is to behave in ways that are tolerated by their emotionally unavailable and sometimes punitive caregiver. We think early caregiving difficulties teach a child to act in certain ways to control how their caregiver responds to them. The way they learn to behave seems to depend on the caregiver-child dynamic. A parent who only attends to dramatic expressions of emotion learns that the only way to get adult attention is to be excessively demanding. A parent who shuns or rejects a distressed child teaches them that the only way they are tolerated by their caregiver is to act self-sufficient despite feeling vulnerable and needy. In the child's mind; acting a certain way will ensure them some control over the parent and the parent's affection.

If your child's behaviour is related to managing boundaries between themselves and significant you may find their behaviour is triggered by the how '*emotionally available*' you are to them at any one time. They may not have any other way to signal their need for attention or 'space'. This kind of behaviour can be particularly hurtful to a foster parent, who can experience it as rejecting and demoralising.

This behaviour can appear similar to 'attention seeking' behaviour. For example, it may occur more when you are feeling tired; when you are pre-occupied or attending to another child. In this case, your child's behaviour can act as a way of signalling that they need your attention; and that it is difficult for them to be near you while your attention is focussed elsewhere. The opposite can also be true- your child can find being close to you overwhelming; and in this case their behaviour is signalling to you that they need to be left alone. In both cases, these behaviours serve to availability when they are feeling anxious and uncomfortable. These behaviours keep your child from feeling anxious and are based on very early learning that your child may be unaware of.

A BOUNDARY behaviour is any behaviour that serves to CONTROL your proximity & emotional availability

Relationship behaviours can improve over time with increasing awareness on the part of the child; and when your child comes to trust in your emotional availability despite their poor behaviour. These kinds of behaviours are likely to re-emerge at times of stress and emotional need; in which children can regress to acting younger than their age.



The core reason for relationship boundary behaviour is your child's overwhelming need to control your emotional and physical proximity.

- Relationship boundary behaviours can be about lacking the trust and confidence in your emotional availability.
- Your child can have very little awareness of these behaviours because they were learnt at a very young age
- How you respond to relationship behaviours depends on whether your child is trying to keep you close or distance you.
- It is useful to understand your child's 'window of tolerance' for emotional proximity.

How can I help my child to manage boundary behaviours?

How you can help your child depends in part on whether your child's behaviour aims to create distance or bring you close. Distancing behaviour is triggered by a caregiver becoming too close, too intimate, or by your child feeling unsettled by long periods of calm, close, comfortable interaction with a caregiver. These behaviours effectively 'push away' a caregiver, giving them the message that they are not needed; thereby re-creating the sense of autonomy and independence that they have been comfortable with from early on in their life. Over time, you can help your child to tolerate increased periods of 'closeness' without resorting to distancing and rejecting behaviour. If your child is old enough it may be useful to gently point out this behaviour and offer an alternative way for your child to signal that they need space from you without resorting to lashing out.

If your child wants to keep you close; angers easily or becomes anxious if they perceive you are not 'available'; your goal will be to help them becoming more self-reliant over time. You will want to help them to tolerate increasing periods of 'independent time' without resorting to using behaviour to bring you running. You might negotiate how often you 'check in' on your child, while encouraging them to play independently. If your child is old enough it may be useful to gently point out this behaviour and offer an alternative way for your child to signal that they need something from you without lashing out.

Try to establish what your child needs in order to be able to tolerate increasing levels of closeness or separation from their important adults. At the same time, it is useful to help the child develop the



capacity to tolerate brief periods of being reliant on, or independent of, you as a caregiver. You can do this by gently acknowledging their discomfort, empathising with it, providing coping strategies (like a favourite toy, or coping self-talk); and supporting them to develop other ways to manage relationship (e.g., by asking or signalling for help when they need attention; or by asking or signalling for time alone when they are feeling intimacy too overwhelming).

I NEED you OR I need SPACE and I don't know how to tell you!

Tips for managing skills-based behaviours

- Remember your child's behaviour is due to powerful early learning that has taught them whether being overly-reliant & attention seeking; or overly competent and avoidant is more comfortable. Try not to take these behaviours personally; they have been important coping tools for your child.
- Acknowledge and validate your child's discomfort when they feel their relationship boundaries are crossed. Acknowledge how frightening it must be to feel that an adult is not dependable.
- Provide your child with a means to signal when they need you, or need space from you.
- Children who are overly self-reliant should be rewarded for behaviours that signal trust, reliance and asking for help.
- Children who are overly demanding, dramatic and attention seeking should be rewarded for behaviours that signal independence, coping and exploration.
- Ask what function does your child's behaviour serve in managing relationship (distancing, gaining proximity, gaining attention)?
- Is your child able to meet this need another way? Is your child willing to meet need another way? What does your child need in order to manage their need to control emotional 'proximity'?
- Depending on your child's relationship style, they will need support and reinforcement for being more independent or for learning to rely on you in times of need. It will be important to reinforce little steps in the right direction, as these behaviours may take time to relinquish.
- It can be helpful to remember that your child's behaviour means that you are important to them; their behaviour is based on need for you.



A SUMMARY

Children's behaviour is meaningful even if it is sometimes perplexing. It can be helpful to reflect on what role your child's behaviour serves. A child will not be likely to relinquish a behaviour until it is no longer needed or because they have been taught an alternative, more socially acceptable behaviour that gets the same result for them.

Supporting children to change their behaviour involves:

- 1) understanding the purpose of the behaviour;
- 2) creating a safe environment to discuss behaviour that challenges and;
- 3) developing an alternative way for your child's need to be met.

These steps are best taken in partnership with your child and other significant adults in your child's life. While safety rules are non-negotiable, all other behavioural expectations are best viewed as something to be worked towards over time. Registered Psychologists are skilled at determining factors that drive and maintain challenging behaviours and it can be useful to consider a referral to a Psychologist when embarking on a plan to address behaviour that challenges.





SAFETY BEHAVIOUR

'I'm afraid' or 'I don't like it!' and I don't know to tell you!

Does your child's behaviour seem linked to attempts to avoid certain activities, or settings?

Does your child's reaction seem extreme considering the trigger?

Does your child mostly seem to engage in this behaviour when faced with an activity or request he/she doesn't like?

Does your child appear much calmer following this behaviour?

Do you find yourself giving in to his/her behaviour because of its intensity?



SELF REGULATION

'I'm overwhelmed' or 'I'm dys-regulated!' and I don't know how to bring myself back to calm!

Does your child mostly seem to engage in this behaviour when tired or unwell?

Does your child's behaviour seem linked to certain sensory stimuli or settings?

Does your child appear much calmer after engaging in this behaviour?

Do you find yourself avoiding certain activities or settings because you know that it will affect your child's behaviour?

Is this behaviour more likely following emotional activities (e.g., visiting biological family)?





SKILL DEFICITS

***'I can't do it!' or 'I can't understand'
and I don't feel safe to tell you!***

Does your child mostly seem to engage in this behaviour when faced with unstructured or unpredictable settings?

Does your child seem to struggle to understand what you are asking?

Does your child express this behaviour when faced with difficult tasks?

Does your child manage better in highly structured settings?

Has your child been assessed as having delayed development in any area (speech, cognitive, motor, reading, spelling or maths)?



BOUNDARY BEHAVIOR

***'I need space' or 'I need you right now!'
and I don't know how to tell you!***

Does your child mostly seem to engage in this behaviour when you and he/she are feeling close and sharing special time?

Does your child mostly seem to engage in this behaviour when you are pre-occupied or feeling unwell?

Does your child react in overly dramatic ways to minor frustrations?

Does your child 'sabotage' activities you are enjoying together?

Does this behaviour only occur around the important adults in your child's life?



To find out more about Developmental Difference and your child, visit;

www.fosteringdifference.com.au

