

**FOSTERING**  
**DIFFERENCE**

# EFFECTIVE PARENT EDUCATION

Guide to Evidence Based Parent Training

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***‘You were born with the ability to change  
someone’s life.  
Don’t ever waste it’***

### **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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## Guide to Effective Foster Parent Education

Supporting foster parents to manage challenging behaviours can be difficult. This resource is intended to provide an overview of *'what we know works'* in providing support for foster parents who are raising children with challenging behaviours. Psychologists can provide detailed support and training in these areas. Effective parent training includes i) psycho-education about the origin and maintenance of problem behaviours, ii) explicit skills training, iii) rehearsal, iv) teaching to 'criterion' and v) homework. Combining these components results in more effective parent education.

### Psycho-Education

Effective parenting interventions include psycho-education about how behaviour problems arise and are maintained. This information normally involves teaching the following:

- Difficult and antisocial behaviour arises in the context of a child's interaction with their carers and their environment. Bad behaviour is 'located' in a poor fit between the child and their environment. Bad behaviour is not 'located' in the child.
- Negative behaviours arise through a combination of social learning, modelling, early attachment experiences, and developmental difference.
- Principles of behaviour management and behaviour 'shaping' (the principles for reinforcing and increasing behaviour; and the principles for extinguishing and reducing unwanted behaviour).
- Principles of the 'functional analysis' of behaviour (determining the purpose that a child's 'bad' behaviour serves).
- Functions that behaviour serve.
- The distinction between behaviour 'rules' and 'expectations'.
- For more information about the 'functions' of problem behaviour, please see 'Foster Parents' Guide to Behaviour Management' and 'Support Workers' Guide to Behaviour Management'

### Explicit Teaching of Skills

Parenting a foster child with developmental difference is both similar and different to parenting other children. Although foster parents may be experienced parents, they can nonetheless struggle to raise



a child with different developmental needs. Experienced foster parents may be reluctant to let you know that they are having difficulty. It can be useful to explain to your foster parents that most foster children need a modified approach to parenting; irrespective of how good the parent may be. These modifications typically include managing children's environmental triggers and modifying parent-child interactions. Foster parents need to be taught how to do this. Special parenting skills for challenging behaviour include:

- Identifying the positive opposite (how to tell a child what you want them to do, not what you don't want them to do).
- How to deliver effective instructions and warnings to a child (one at a time, structured, simple, short, age appropriate, positively phrased, action-oriented).
- How to pick a battle (planned ignoring; compromise and negotiation; rules versus expectations).
- How to reward using reinforcement and praise (and how to modify this technique to suit their child).
- How to shape behaviour in increments (create hierarchy of small improvements towards the end goal).
- Appropriate use of time out (time in). Teach 'plan ahead' skills.
- Teach how to model and facilitate problem solving skills (What am I supposed to do? What are the options? What would happen if I do that? Make a choice. How did it go?).
- Teach how to model and coach children in calming self-talk; problem solving, emotional regulation, communication, perspective taking, and social skills.

### **Use Rehearsal & Role Plays**

Research on effective parenting interventions tells us that learning is enhanced when parents practice skills during their session with you. Rehearsal and role plays are techniques that help parents to practice responses so they become automatic in high pressure situations. Typically, the parent



observes the trainer run through a skill; then they take part in role play(s) in which these skills are practised. This method helps embed specific skills to use in specific situations; so that they become 'second nature'. Rehearsing difficult situations helps to make these skills so familiar to the parent that when they are under pressure from their child, effective parenting skills become the 'automatic' default response; rather than emotion-driven behaviour.

Research on parenting shows that it is important to observe parents enacting skills in person. Ensure that parents not only *understand* the components of effective parenting approaches but can *perform them 'to criterion' under observation* and in situ. Any difficulties can then be ironed out and parents can practice corrected skills until they master them. In short, it is important to ensure parents not only understand the skills you teach them, but that they can carry them out in practice in a satisfactory way.

### **Give Homework**

Research shows that learning is enhanced when parents are given the opportunity to practice skills outside of the counselling session. This is referred to as giving 'homework' exercises.

Psychologists routinely prescribe 'homework' exercises as these provide an opportunity for parents to practice and reflect on the skills they have been taught. Typically, parents write down when they used the skills, together with their reflections and responses to using these skills with their child. These notes are brought to the next session for discussion.

Homework might also include asking the parent to practice having calm conversations with their child about their behaviour, at times when the child is not mis-behaving. The aim of this type of homework is for the parent to gain some empathy and sense of the child's perspective on their behaviour with a view to shared (future-focused) problem solving.

Parents can also be set 'positive' interaction time homework with their child. In this exercise, parents are asked to spend quality child-led time together with their child, in which no instructing, questioning, commanding, or criticising is allowed. Activities must be chosen and led by the child and the focus is on both parent and child experiencing positive interaction without any agenda other than enjoying each other's company. This positive 'floor-time' is important in counteracting the normal 'problem-saturated' interactions that can characterise many interactions between parents and children with challenging behaviour.

### **Use These Approaches to Compliment Child-Focused Interventions**

Supporting parenting interactions is one important aspect of making parent-child interactions more effective. At the same time, supporting the child to develop self-regulation and problem solving skills is also important.



Children can benefit from cognitive behavioural strategies to address the factors that maintain challenging behaviour: to challenge a child's hostile attribution bias, develop their coping self-talk and to foster distraction techniques and problem solving skills. Children can be taught about how to recognise and respond to bodily symptoms of emotions; and how to manage strong emotions. Children are also likely to need support with learning positive social skills such as initiating play, resolving conflict and communicating their feelings to others.

It can be useful to have any children supported by a different therapist, depending on the age of the child. Registered Psychologists are trained to teach these skills to children.

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