

Successful Foster Parenting

*Mission Impossible**

**or is it?*

Jasper Mountain

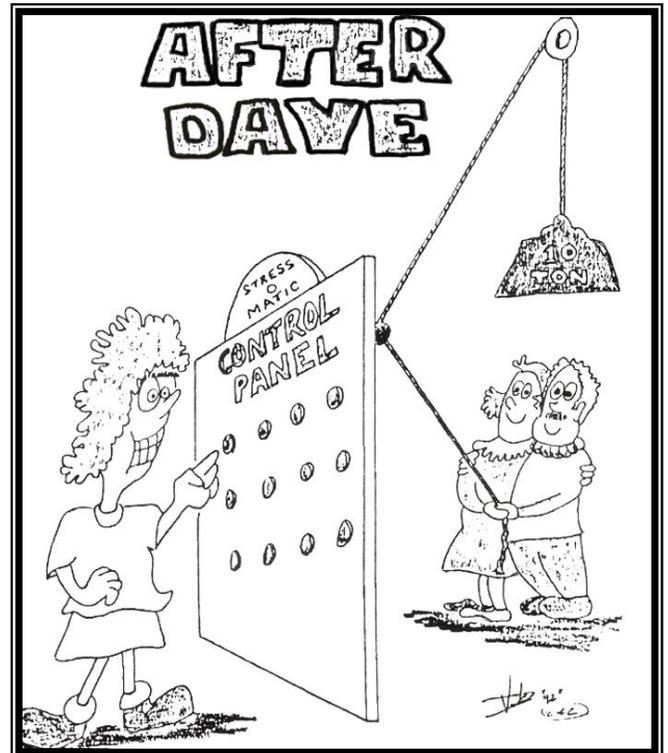
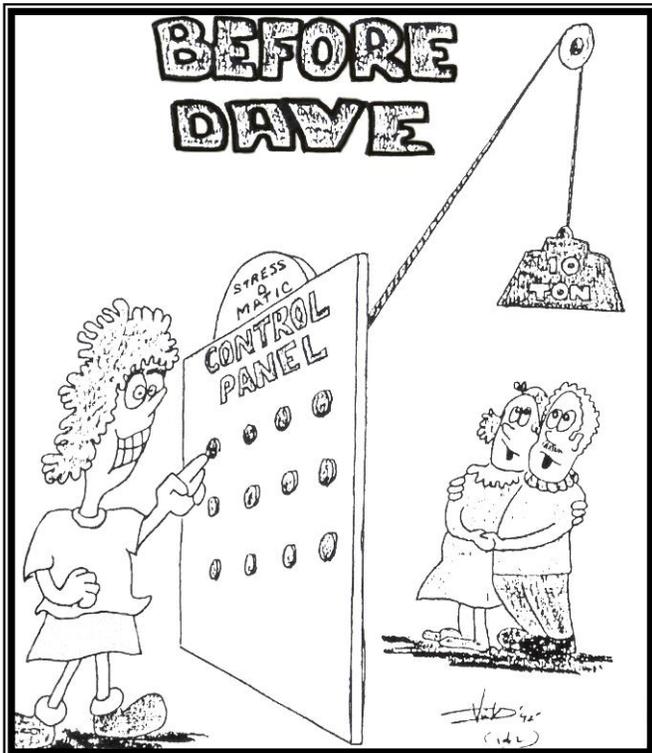


Table of Contents

About The Authors	2
About The Cover	2
Introduction	3
<i>Figure 1 – Building Blocks Of Treating Emotional Disturbance</i>	3
Emotional and Social Needs of Children	4
Surviving and Thriving In Foster Care	6
What Successful Foster Homes Look Like	6
Strategies For Success	8
Talking With Your Child	10
Big Problems That Need Big Solutions	10
▪ Love vs. Strict, Easy vs. Hard....11	
▪ Understanding How Foster Children Think....11	
▪ How To Love Someone Who Doesn't Want To Be Loved....11	
▪ What To Say When They Ask You To Adopt Them....12	
▪ What Is The Role Of The Foster Parent....12	
▪ When To Seek Professional Help For The Child....12	
▪ When To Seek Professional Help For Their Families....12	
▪ How To Handle Feelings About the System....13	
▪ How To Keep Up Your Energy....13	
▪ How To Know When To Take A Break From Foster Parenting....13	
Positive Discipline	13
Mastering Responsibility	15
What To Do When Things Get Difficult	16
The Battle Field – Difficult Problems For Parents	17
▪ Power Struggles....17	
▪ Sexual Issues And Problems....17	
▪ Lying....18	
▪ Stealing....19	
▪ Tantrums....19	
10 Steps For Effective Foster Parenting	20
What Is And Isn't Normal	22
In Summary	27
Final Thoughts...	27

About The Authors

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Judy Littlebury - Director and founder of Jasper Mountain Center's Residential Program. Judy has the training and education of other mental health professionals but, more importantly, she knows about foster children from direct experience. She has seventeen years of professional work experience with abused children and has been a foster parent for the past eleven years. Judy works with all the children adopted out of Jasper Mountain and adopted one of the program's most challenging children four years ago.

The Cover

In 1988, a couple with no children of their own and no experience whatsoever with children, contacted Jasper Mountain with the good-hearted but impractical request to be considered as an adoptive family for one of the program's most difficult children. With great skepticism of the prospect of success, we began teaching this middle-aged couple about the challenges and huge obstacles of foster parenting. They learned quickly and, much to our surprise, they were not scared away and even seemed to enjoy the challenges the child provided.

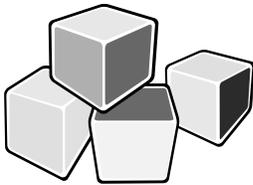
This couple has gone on to adopt two children and are a treatment foster home for a third. All three children are from Jasper Mountain's program and all three are very difficult and demanding children. The father is an artist and drew the before and after cartoons on the cover. An important feature of the cartoons is that the difference in success and failure was in the hands of the parents. The child in both cartoons is doing the very same thing. If you understand the full message of his drawings you may not need to read on. But if you want to know what put the control in the hands of the parents, the answer is in the following pages...

Introduction

Has anyone ever told you that you are a saint for wanting to adopt or foster parent a difficult child? What they really mean is that you should have your head examined! The following pages attempt to do just that. If you don't examine your head, your motivations, your style, your vulnerabilities and your strengths, then the process of parenting an abused and confused child may very well shorten your life more than alligator wrestling.

The premise behind all you will read is that parenting is like life; it can be a painful ordeal punctuated by mistakes and failures or it can be a constant classroom where there is something new to learn around every corner. It just may be that we learn the most from our mistakes and failures. If so, welcome to the most fertile soil for learning about yourself anywhere. This may sound a bit overstated or dramatic to some, but please remember we have lived with the most skilled manipulators, the hardest to love, the hardest headed and all-around nastiest little guys CSD has to offer. But they are all scared, misunderstood, great kids underneath (just like every caseworker tells you before they place Genghis Khan, Jr. into your home). But how do you get underneath? I'm glad you asked...

Building Blocks of Treating Emotional Disturbance



Personal Worth	Self acceptance, self respect, self love
Self-Awareness (18 months →)	exterior feedback insight
Relationship (12 – 24 months)	non-victimizing interplay of persons and roles
Trust (12 – 24 months)	respect, fairness, honesty, firmness, power
Belonging (12 – 20 months)	affection, roots, membership in group
Acceptance (12 – 18 months)	person vs. behavior
Security (6 – 18 months)	consistency, structure, locus of control
Safety (3 – 12 months)	predictability, non-violence, basic needs not threatened or conditioned

Figure 1

Emotional and Social Needs of Children

Safety

Will I be abused here?

Can these people protect me from the person who has abused me?

- Predictability
- Non-violence
- Power, boundaries, firmness
- Basic needs are not conditional

Security

What's going on?

Who is in charge and are they safe?

Will there be any terrible or painful surprises?

- Structure, structure and more structure
- Consistency
- Parents are clearly in charge
- Predictability

Acceptance

If they knew what I have done, what I think, or who I am will they still like me?

Will they reject me like my family did?

How can I hide who I really am from them to protect myself?

- Distinguish the person from the behavior
- Support the person and confront the behavior
- Reflect the positives you see. They may have never heard positives
- Help teach them how to be a likable person

Belonging

They don't really want me, do they?

I don't know if I fit in anywhere.

I will push them away to see if they reject me.

- Find ways that they fit into the family.
- Use as much physical affection as the child can handle.
- Have one-on-one time with the child.
- Include them in family activities.

Trust

Can I tell them what I have been through?

Can I be myself at this home?

Will they tell me the truth about my future?

- Be honest
- Be firm to gain their respect
- Be fair when you can be

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Relationships

Will they use me?

Will they let me down if I rely on them?

What will they get out of this?

- Don't overdo it
- One step at a time
- Make sure there is give and take
- Everyone wins, no one loses

Self-Awareness

Who am I?

How do they see me?

Do they really like anything about me?

- Be honest about what you like and don't like.
- Give them a constant view of what you see
- Make sure you find things that are impressive
- Tell them, don't try to sell them

Personal Worth

Am I a valuable person?

What is unique about me?

Do I add something to the lives of others?

- Help them act right
- Help them think correctly
- Help them to learn to help others
- Let them know what is special and unique about them

Social Needs

- The need for attention
- The need for connection
- The need to be an individual
- The need to belong
- The need to be a part of something beyond the self (family, team, gang, club, peer group, etc.)

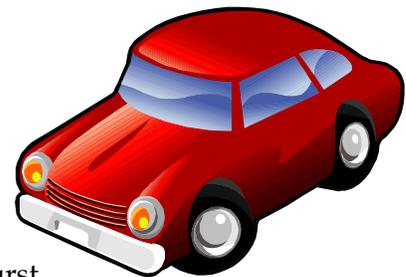
Surviving and Thriving In Foster Care

There is a big difference in success from one foster home to the next. Some foster parents have been providing foster care for years to dozens of children. Others ask that the child be removed and discontinue being a foster parent after the first or second try. What makes the difference? There are probably many reasons that make foster parents successful, but perhaps the most important is knowing how to take on all the challenges of foster parenting and make it a positive experience for everyone. The following is a very brief course in doing just that – successful foster parenting.

Maintaining More Than Your Sanity

Maintaining a healthy home can be compared to maintaining an automobile. There are issues that need attention and as the ad goes, “you can pay me now or pay me later”. Here are some comparisons:

Check the radiator = Keep it cool, don't overheat
Check the steering & brakes = Stay in control at all times
Keep the battery charged = Keep your energy
Tune up for performance = Maintain your power
Check the plugs = Keep your spark
Check wear on tires = Realize you are wearing down before you burst



Each of these suggestions is all you really need to know about surviving foster care. The best truths are simple ones. A recent best seller tells us that we learned everything we need for a happy fulfilled life in kindergarten. Well, some of us may have got it all the first time, but most of us could use a refresher course. If you can take the above suggestions and know exactly how to implement them, then stop here. But if you need to hear a bit more, read on...

What Successful Foster Homes Look Like

The new phrase these days is “special needs” children. Don't all foster children have special needs? Successful foster homes caring for children with special needs tend to have lots of TLC. Tender loving care you say? Absolutely not! Tender loving care is usually in abundant supply in failed foster placements and it also just may be one of the principal problems. In this case, **TLC** means something very different:

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T - Translating correctly what is really going on with the child to understand the child's world. It is commonly known that manipulative teenagers (and aren't they all) talk in opposites. It is often a safe bet to retranslate what they are saying to get closer to the truth (practice by retranslating the following: I don't want rules, I'm not worried about my future, I am all caught up on my school work, and I'll be home early tonight). This same principle works with special needs children. But don't stop with a child's words. Children are almost always truthful, but with their eyes not always with their words. Knowing what is going on with the child takes some work and translation.

L - Learning from the challenges of caring for a difficult child becomes one of the indicators of success, not how smooth it's going for everyone. If you want smooth, get some jello. Foster care is not smooth. It is trouble or challenge depending on your point of view. The more you see it as a challenge to learn from, the better the candidate you are to work with a difficult child. It is generally healthy for children to engage with adults, but you will not always like the engagement (refusals, tantrums, arguments). Children that don't engage with you are an even bigger challenge.

C - Stay in Control at all times in all situations involving the child. These children did not get difficult on their own. They had lots of help from chaotic, abusive and neglectful families that could not provide a safe or secure home. Constant control sounds pretty heavy, but if you parent one of these children, they will constantly test to see just how in control you are. If they are able to gain control of decisions, what happens in the family, and the mood and tone of the household, everyone loses; if they can't, everyone wins – it is just that simple.

TLC - Translating, Learning and in Control. Easier said than done you say and you are right. But here is part of the point: what does foster care offer you?

It offers an opportunity to grow yourself as you give a deserving child a new chance at succeeding in a family. If you don't want to change and grow yourself, then stop here and take up stamp collecting instead.



Strategies For Success

Interested in some other tips that may be helpful?

- Understand the real needs of the child. It is not often helpful to listen to their words or even their behavior because of the opposite issue. If they have had an abusive or neglectful past then their needs are pretty straight forward despite the way they act. These children need:

Safety – Will I be safe in a non-violent environment where my basic needs will be met?

Security – I need a structured situation where a parent is in charge and I can just be a kid.

Acceptance – I need people who can accept me as a person even if they don't like or accept my behavior.

Belonging – I need to belong to someone. I need to be connected to others and learn to give and receive affection.

Trust – I need to learn to trust and be trusted; be treated fairly with honesty, respect and firmness.

Relationship – I need to be in relation to others in a way that no one is victimized and both sides are enhanced.

Self-Awareness – I need to learn how to make changes in my personality and behavior through self-understanding.

Personal Worth – The final indicator of my being a success as a person is “do I believe in myself and my own worth?”

- Positive discipline is the quickest route to your maintaining control and building the child's personal worth at the same time. Techniques include: separating the child from the behavior, don't punish—discipline (which means to teach), don't let “time outs” become a disguised punishment. Use logical consequences. Don't ask the child to lie by asking questions you know the answer to and avoid power struggles. Have the child fight with himself not with you. Keep your sense of humor and don't let the child decide what you will feel (don't let them anger you when they are trying to) and allow the child to change and be more responsible by not always locking them into past behaviors.
- Learn to win the manipulation game. Don't let the child use your rules against you. Don't be completely predictable to a manipulative child, you become an easy target. Keep them off balance when they are trying to beat you. In general, if the child is manipulating to get something, do your best to prevent them from getting their way or you will get more manipulation (because it worked). Stay a couple of steps ahead of them by predicting what they might do and what you will do in return. Don't respond emotionally, you don't think very creatively

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then. Parenting is best done by a team so talk over your next move and get advice and ideas. If the child has you on the run, they win the manipulation game and both of you lose.

- Get the help you need from the right source. Frankly, some counselors who don't understand these children can make the situation considerably worse. It is not much of a challenge for a manipulative child to be "perfect" one hour a week in someone's office. If the counselor starts looking at you like you must be the problem, get someone else. Ask a prospective counselor about their experience with foster care, abused children and kids with attachment problems (an expert mechanic with Fords may not be an expert at Studebakers). Or better yet, go to a counselor who comes highly recommended for their skills with a child like yours.
- The only given is that foster care will be a challenge, but it does not have to be terrible. The difference is something you have complete control over—your feelings and sense of humor. A wise man once said, "if you lose your sense of humor, the world just isn't funny anymore" and foster care is like that.
- Make sure you are more than a parent. If you are a parent 24 hours a day, you have become pretty dull. Be a wife, a student, a hiker, a volunteer, a square dancer, an artist, a husband, or whatever but don't get stuck in the parent role where there is a whole lot more giving than receiving. Batteries don't last long if they never get recharged.
- Don't get in a hurry. The saddest failed placements are the ones where the child is desperately testing and the parents call it off. If the parents could only translate what is going on and understand that the desperation is an indicator that the testing is nearly over and the parents have almost passed the test. These children have lived in a hurtful world for a long time and it takes time for them to be vulnerable again. But don't continue down a road that is clearly leading nowhere. Get some help from a counselor who has a good road map. There may be a much better road to get where you want to go.



Talking With Your Child

Is it possible to really communicate with your kids—like real people, not like the Simpsons? The good news is “yes, absolutely;” the bad news is you might have to throw out some old habits and develop some new ones. Change is always difficult, but I think you’ll find the results are well worth the effort (and if you don’t, the problems are not worth the grief). The following ideas are adapted from How To talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Really listen, not just pretend you’re listening➤ Accept your child’s feelings➤ Identify feelings➤ Acknowledge the child’s wishes (you don’t have to give in to them) <p style="text-align: center;">Remember:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Children want to please the important people in their lives➤ There is a direct relationship between how a child feels and behaves➤ If a child feels listened to and respected, he or she will be much more likely to cooperate➤ The purpose of discipline is to teach , not to punish➤ Abuse affects how a child responds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Blame or accuse➤ Name-call➤ Threaten➤ Give orders➤ Lecture or moralize➤ Catastrophize➤ Lay guilt trips➤ Make comparisons➤ Be sarcastic➤ Predict the future

And, most of all, don’t panic because you’ve just lost all your good lines. The goal is to encourage cooperation so you both end up feeling good about yourselves and each other.

Big Problems That Need Big Solutions

Love vs. Strict... Easy vs. Hard

There is no difference between being firm and being loving. To a child who is not in their own home, structure, predictability and a clear understanding of what is expected of them is essential. Not knowing is what causes anxiety and fear. Children (particularly teens) complain about rules and expectations, but they are lost without them. Therefore, to be truly loving with a foster child – be firm and let them know what is expected of them.

The goal is to strike a balance between easy and hard. But, remember, it is always easier with human beings to get easier than to get harder. Therefore, start out on the hard side and ease up when it seems right to do so. Teachers sometimes say, “don’t smile the first month of school to let them know you are serious.” It’s okay to smile, but make sure they know you are to be taken seriously. To an abused child, the only safe adult is one who is in charge and has the child’s best interests at heart. Doctors don’t ask children if they want an inoculation; dentists don’t ask if the child wants their cavities filled; so parents should never ask a child if they want to do what needs to be done.

Understanding How Foster Children Think

Abused children often do what most teenagers do and that is to speak in code. In order to understand what is really being said, the parent must *translate* correctly. There is no simple rule, but it is important to remember not to take their words at face value. You must open your heart and mind to translate a child’s words and actions correctly. “I don’t want to go to school” may really mean “I’m very afraid of failing,” or, “go away and leave me alone” may really be “I’ll test them to see if they really care and will stay with me.” It takes time to understand what a foster child is saying. Try your best and then watch the child to see if you got the right message – HINT – actions always speak louder than words!

How To Love Someone Who Doesn’t Want To Be Loved

If you understand this one thing, loving them will be much easier – foster children often don’t feel worthy of being loved. They usually have many reasons to feel unlovable. They have been told this, they have been rejected, they have been used, they have not been wanted, and much more. Remember, everyone wants love no matter what they say or how they act. Do your best to give them what they need, not necessarily what they want or ask for. The job of a parent is to meet the child’s needs. Love is the greatest need. Don’t wait for a request or invitation to love. It may never come. Reach

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out, override their pushing you away. They may never accept your love but you may be planting seeds that sprout later when you aren't around.

What To Say When They Ask You To Adopt Them

If you aren't going to adopt them, say so. It is not knowing that causes a child anxiety. The reasons you give must be your own, but the answer must be clear. "We are too old to be your adoptive parents" or "we are only your temporary family, but you will get a permanent one" or some other reason, is less important than you making it clear to them where they stand.

What Is The Role Of The Foster Parent?

For the child, your role is to protect them, meet their needs, and respect their uniqueness as a person. For the system, you are the one who knows the most about this child—yes, even more than the experts. Make sure you let the people who make decisions for this child know what the child is like and how the child feels about decisions which affect them. Foster parents are often the ones who do the work while experts take the credit or assign the blame. If the caseworker or counselor or judge does not ask your opinion, offer it anyway—you owe this to the child.

When To Seek Professional Help For The Child

When things aren't going well with your car engine, the furnace in your home, or with your eyesight, you ask for help from someone who knows more than you do. No one expects you to be an expert on foster children. When things aren't going well, ask for help from someone who knows about foster children. That may be a friend, another foster parent, the local pastor or a child counselor. When you want or need help—get it. It is almost always easier to improve a situation before it gets very bad.

How To Handle Feelings About Their Families

Don't ignore your feelings, but don't share them with the child. The families of foster children are often confused, ineffective or downright abusive. The child knows this. They do not need to hear this from you and will seldom accept your saying the truth. Turn your anger or frustration into patience to hear how the child feels about their family. You need only listen. You don't have to express your opinion to the child. However, if you ignore your feelings, they will sneak out when you don't realize it. Therefore, be honest with what you think of the child's family and talk to another adult about it—not the child.

How To Handle Feelings About The System

Here is one of the ways you can directly love a child. The child needs you to be effective in dealing with the caseworker, counselor, teacher and judge. These are very important people to the child. They make decisions that have a major impact on their lives. If you get frustrated or give up, the child loses. Again, be aware of how you feel about the way the system works or doesn't work for you or the child. Then take effective action. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease and if you make it clear you have no intention of shutting up and going away, they are likely to pay attention.

How To Keep Up Your Energy

First, foster parenting cannot be the only thing you do. Make sure you have other interests and pursuits. Recharge your batteries by bungee jumping, parachuting, snake charming or other suitable pastimes. To keep your energy account from being overdrawn, find something that usually deposits energy in the account. Parenting usually requires more energy withdrawals than deposits. Don't take yourself (or the system) too seriously. If you lose your sense of humor, you are in trouble. Get away from the child periodically; it will help you appreciate and enjoy them more. Foster parenting is very hard work. Find a support system that will help you when you start to wonder if it's worth it.

How To Know When To Take A Break From Foster Parenting

When your energy account is low, it can be replenished. But if your energy is gone, more drastic action may be necessary. No child gains from being in the home of a parent who has little or nothing left to give. If you start thinking that you must hang in there for the child—reconsider the message you might be sending them that they are a burden. If you are not enjoying at least some aspects of foster parenting or if you find nothing amusing about the whole thing or if you have long since stopped learning about yourself or others—it is time to get out for awhile. If this occurs, take a break. You have little reason to fear that when you get your own energy back, there won't be any foster children to help anymore. Make a commitment to the child—take care of yourself.

Positive Discipline

The most difficult task in life is to be an effective parent. The expectation of society is that we somehow know how to do this with no training, experience or even an owner's manual. There are many schools of thought on how we *should* raise a child, but we believe the best method comes from the simplest concept—discipline.

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Discipline comes from the root word: “to teach.” Compare this to the root word for punishment which means: “to penalize.” When a child is trying to understand the very complex task of becoming a successful person, do we want to respond to teach them or penalize them? The best form of discipline is positive discipline. There are a number of factors to this form of parenting:

- **The parent is always in charge.** The first step is to insure that everyone knows who is teaching and who is being taught. To establish this, the parent must be the one in control and in charge. This does not mean that the parent dominates. It means that the child has the opportunity to try leadership and creativity, but when and how they can do this is decided by the parent.
- **Avoid punishment in favor of logical consequences.** Punishment is a two-edged sword. It is used so often by parents because in the short run it works; however, it has side effects that are almost never wanted. Punishment breeds punishment in return. It teaches children how to punish others. It can also discourage the child from trying which means they will make mistakes. Logical consequences teach the child that certain effects generally follow certain actions. What we get is directly related to what we give.
- **Don’t ask a question that you know the answer to.** This is not only setting up the conditions for a child to lie, it is modeling a lie. What you are doing is pretending not to know something you, in fact, do know. When you find a child has done something wrong, tell them what you know and model directness and honesty.
- **Every day is a new day.** In fact, every situation is a new day. This means that when the child is ready to learn and do it right, you are ready to let them. Just because they have done poorly many times, will you let them do it right this time?
- **Don’t make decisions or discipline when you are angry.** Discipline takes all the brain power you have and is best separated from adrenaline. We do not think well when upset. We don’t buy a house, choose a spouse or decide a career when we are angry, so don’t discipline when angry either.
- **Parenting is a team sport.** Don’t go into battle without support. In this age of single parent families, there are still friends or relatives that can act as a member of your parenting team. Two heads are definitely better than one on this issue.

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- **Distinguish the behavior from the person.** Don't forget that it is the child's action that you are irritated by, disgusted with, or homicidal about—it is not the child. If you can't distinguish between the two, neither can the child.



Mastering Responsibility

One of the most difficult and important tasks of a parent is to teach responsibility to children. This is even more of a challenge if the child is in foster care. But this challenge must be met if the end result is to be positive for everyone. Here are some tips on teaching responsibility using the MASTER approach:

Model responsibility yourself

The most potent teaching tool is modeling. It does not work to say one thing and do another. Children learn from your actions, not your words. If a parent smokes and says, "don't ever do this" they are teaching a child to smoke. A child watches a parent figure to learn how to do most everything. If you model responsibility, the child will learn responsibility.

A Home Environment Where All Adults Show Responsibility

Children learn from all the adults in their world. If you are responsible and your spouse is not, the child will learn both and will do what is easiest (being irresponsible). The child's world must model being responsible all the time for them to learn that it is important all the time.

Stop Irresponsible Behavior Before It Becomes A Habit

What you allow, you condone. What you condone you support. All irresponsible behavior must be pointed out and not accepted, or the child will learn that it is acceptable. It will also become habit forming for the child not to take responsibility. If there were no enforcement of the speed limit on Interstate 5, how fast would cars go? Children (and adults) need to be held accountable.

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Teach Responsibility As Young As Possible

Children need to learn responsibility from the beginning. Parents that put this off and say “he’s only a child” are asking for trouble. Patterns are developed very early. There are plenty of age equivalent responsibility issues for very young children – putting away toys, cleaning up a mess they made, cleaning dirty shoes before walking on the carpet, and many others.



Expect Responsible Behavior Every Time

The favorite strategy of an irresponsible child is to wear you out so you stop expecting much from them. Don’t fall into this trap. Express surprise and expect the child to do it right each time, even if you are not very surprised. The message is that you expect the right behavior, not that you expect irresponsible behavior.



Reinforce Responsible Behavior

Make it worth their while to be responsible. It is harder and takes more energy to be responsible and it is often not very comfortable for a child. Therefore, let them know how good a job they do when they are responsible. Whatever a child gets more attention for, they will do more of. Does responsible behavior get more attention at our house than irresponsible behavior?

What To Do When Things Get Difficult

Most foster parents do fine most of the time. When things get real difficult, it is sometimes a different matter. Like any skill, our parenting ability can improve with practice through the challenge of working with difficult children in difficult situations. There is a difference between good foster parents and excellent foster parents and this is easiest to see when things get challenging. Most foster parents (and parents in general) prefer peace and harmony in their home. They don’t like conflict and prefer not to have difficult problems to handle. On the other hand, excellent foster parents also like peace and harmony but see problems as a way for the child to learn and a chance for the parent to improve their skills as well.



Excellent foster parents face problems head on without giving the message to the child that they resent having to work with them or the challenges they create. Ask yourself the question, “do I avoid problems or become frustrated and angry when my children disrupt the normal family routine? There are three things to do with every problem. Remember the TLC approach talked about earlier:

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Translate what the child is saying and doing. They seldom tell you directly what they think, feel or really want. A good parent is one that can translate a statement like, “I hate this family” into “please tell me I belong here” and translate the behavior of a child that hits other children into knowing that they want to make friends but don’t know how to do it. You can’t help a child if you don’t know what is going on inside them. To know this, you must figure it out; they will seldom tell you in words.

Learn from every situation. Every challenge and problem is an opportunity for you to practice your parenting skills and for you to learn more about the child. Focus more on what there is to learn in this situation and less on wishing you didn’t have this problem in the first place. If you can do this, you will enjoy your role as a parent more.

Control the situation. A crisis, either big or small, is a time when the child is out of control with either their behavior or their emotions. It doesn’t help for the parent to be out of control also. So stay in control of the situation and of yourself. Don’t let a child dictate if you are going to be angry or frustrated. If the parent isn’t in control, then there are two children and no parents in the situation.

The Battle Field – Difficult Problems For Parents

Power Struggles

We have all been in a power struggle “you will,” “I won’t,” “oh yes you will,” “oh no I won’t.” Children will not always say this out loud but you can bet they are saying it to themselves. So how can this be handled? The best approach is to avoid them entirely. Can that be done? Yes, the better the parent, the fewer the power struggles. Here are some suggestions:



- Instead of you confronting the child, have children confront themselves.
- Don’t present such a big target for the child to shoot at.
- Be in control of yourself and the situation.
- The fine art of distracting the stubborn child.

Sexual Issues and Problems

Wouldn’t it be nice if these children could become adults before they discover sex? But it just doesn’t work that way. Unfortunately, most foster children have been introduced to sex very early and often by an adult. What works with sexual problems?

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- Treat sexual issues like any other issues. Don't give it a lot of energy or mystery or you will get more problems. Children are curious, if you hide something, they want to find it. Talk about sex directly, make it clear what is inappropriate, and treat sexual misbehavior as you treat other misbehavior.
- With younger children, talk about sexual behavior as the "sex game". This is a game that you can't play in our family like the "let's throw mustard on the carpet" game or "let's surprise mommy in the shower" game. Let's face it, sex is fun for children as well as adults, but even though a game is fun doesn't mean they can play it. Let children know directly what is and isn't allowed.
- Get comfortable talking about sex or children will get all their information from magazines, Geraldo, Hollywood, or other children.

Lying

None of us like lies, partly because we have all told at least one in our lives. This is the time that children learn if they can tell the truth without being harmed. Here are some ideas to get more truth and fewer lies:

- If a child lies, talk about the statement being a lie, not the child being a liar. The worst thing we can do is to begin giving the child a self-image as a liar. If this happens, they will lie more often.
- Don't ask a child to lie by asking them a question you already know the answer to: "Do you know where my necklace is (that I just found in your drawer)?" You are telling a lie by pretending you don't know and you will probably get a lie back.
- Translate the lie. Maybe it is more of a statement of a need than an attempt to deceive you.
- Model the truth. Truth is very hard for all of us. "Boss, I want to let you know that I just made a mistake that will cost the company thousands of dollars." Adults have had more practice at telling the truth and how well do they do? This is a time to teach children to be more and more truthful, even when we make mistakes.
- Talk about trust. Tell them how much you want to believe everything they tell you, but they will have to make an agreement to be truthful.
- Don't argue. If it clearly is a lie, act accordingly. You don't need evidence to prove it in court.

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Stealing

Nearly all foster children steal, but for many different reasons. Some take food because they haven't had enough to eat. Some steal nice things because they have never had nice things; and some steal hoping to get caught. How can a parent handle stealing?

- First of all, translate the behavior to see what it means.
- Save the morality issue for later. If you treat stealing as a major crime, that gives it a lot of importance and you just may get more of it. Stealing is an obnoxious behavior. Treat the behavior as matter-of-fact without a lot of emotional energy. Remember, the more attention you give a child for something they do, the more they will do it.
- Restitution is a good idea.
- Use logical consequences.

Tantrums

Starting at birth, humans have a habit of throwing a fit when they don't get what they want. Usually, we become more subtle and sophisticated with our tantrums as we grow older. Foster children are seldom subtle. How to handle tantrums:

- Remember, none of us like it when we don't get our way. Children are often just more honest about letting us know.
- Translate the behavior. What is the goal of the tantrum?
- Do not let the tantrum be successful or you have taught the child to throw a fit to get what they want.
- Do what you can to eliminate the audience. Remove the child from the crowded store or have the child go to a quiet room to finish their tantrum. Tantrums are usually designed for an audience, and without the audience, it just isn't the same.

Parenting is like any other skill. You aren't very good at it the first twenty times you try something new. Practice is the key. So, thank your foster children for giving you the chance to practice when they are a problem and watch the surprised expression on their face!



10 Steps For Effective Foster Parenting

1. Firm, Firm, Firm and Friendly

Without firmness you will not earn respect from the child. Respect is more than a nice thing to have. It is a statement that the child believes that you have sufficient power in a situation to do what needs to be done. Therefore, you must have consistent follow-through and not fall for manipulative tricks. Teachers know that you must first impress upon your students that you mean business and then you become friends. The same is true for foster parenting.

Being friendly is important because some abused children worry about further abuse. Unless you can lay down the law in a neutral or friendly fashion, the child may believe that you are simply another abusive adult in their life. Being firm when it's fair and when you can distinguish between the child and the behavior is the goal, and it may be a new experience for many foster children.

2. Stay in Control of Your Behavior, Feelings and Your Household

Although healthy families understand that the adults in the family are in charge, this is often not true in unhealthy families. Abused children know that adults that cannot control their feelings are either dangerous to themselves or to the child. Manipulative children know that if they can get you frustrated, upset or hopeless, they can control you. Some children try to rule the household with their behavior or attitudes. Ask yourself the question, "is there anything the child can do today that is sure to make me angry?" If so, they will probably do it. A general rule is to never get angry or frustrated when the child wants it. An effective foster parent stays in control of the situation no matter what the challenge.

3. Be A Good Listener

After you have been very clear as to what you expect from the child, go the next step and be a sensitive listener. Being a good listener means that you truly are interested in what they have to say. You can't fake this with children—they know if you are just putting up with them or if you are really interested. It also means that you do your best to understand their point of view. Ask questions, re-phrase what they say to get it clear, and show patience when they are not sure of the right words by giving them a chance to think it through. Let's be honest—some of the things that interest a child are not real exciting to you, so it takes work to be truly interested. It will take time and effort to listen to a child. How good of a job do you do?

4. Have Realistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations of foster children are either too difficult or too easy. Both of these expectations work against you and the child. Get the facts on the child in your home. Are there medical or psychological reasons that the child has problems understanding or following directions? If you don't know the facts, you may be

asking for more or less than you should from the child. It is asking too much to expect the child not to make mistakes, to always do the right thing, and to understand your reasons and motivations for what you say and do. Not asking enough of a child is consistently doing for them what they can do for themselves so they can feel competent and self-reliant. Not asking enough is to let the child off the hook when they break the rules because they have had a hard life. They are going to have an even harder life if they do not learn to be responsible for their actions. Don't ask for too much or too little. Strive to make your expectations of the child realistic.

5. Take Care of Yourself

Anyone who is a full-time foster parent is either boring or a bomb ready to go off. The same is true for all parents. You can't be a parent twenty-four hours a day and have a life. When you are a parent, do a good job. But leave your job to be other things as well—like a good wife or husband, an employee, a gardener, a friend, or many other roles that are also important along with parenting. Much of the time, foster children take more than they give. Your energy is much like your bank account. If there are only energy withdrawals and no energy deposits the result is predictable. If you don't have a full life, your emotional bank will soon be overdrawn.

6. Keep a Sense of Humor



This is one of the best ways to take care of yourself. An ability to laugh, particularly at oneself is one of the truest signs of wisdom. If you can find no humor in a situation, you are probably taking it too seriously. Parenting is difficult and serious enough without us making it more so. If you aren't having fun being a parent, the chances are they aren't having fun being a child. It is important to model a sense of humor.

7. Know When To Get Help

The problems foster children bring into your home are not your fault. You aren't expected to know how to handle everything that you face. The scary parents are those that never ask for help. It is important to be able to say "I don't know what to do." When you are stuck, get help. Ask a friend, someone you trust, a caseworker, counselor, or minister. Another sign of wisdom is knowing what you don't know and finding someone who may be able to help you.

8. Teamwork Is The Key

Parenting is a team sport. There are times that the parent doesn't have a partner or have a partner that helps rather than gets in the way. When this is the case, a smart parent will get help from a friend, family member, advisor or someone to help them do the best job they can as a parent. It is not always true that two heads are better than one, but this is usually true for parenting.

9. **Don't Stop Learning**

If you think you know all there is to know about parenting, then write a book, become famous and make lots of money, but don't be a foster parent. Foster parents must know that they will be asked to come up with solutions to problems they have not caused or have never faced before. They must think on their feet. They must be prepared to make mistakes and to learn from them. If you are someone who knows that you don't always know, then why complain when a foster child gives you a challenge to learn more? Foster children are actually excellent teachers when they make it difficult for us. You have the choice of complaining or you can appreciate the opportunity. An effective foster parent, who has done it for many years, is usually one who continues to learn and grow and understands that challenges are one of the best ways to learn more.

10. **The Best You Can Do Is Your Best**

If this sounds obvious then ask yourself why you are upset the next time you do your best and it didn't work out the way you wanted. We often confuse success with the outcome of a situation. Success is really when we do the best we can in any situation, not when the situation comes out just the way we would like. Any experienced parent knows that you seldom get exactly what you want from a child. The effective parent will focus on themselves and ask if they can do more or do better, but also understands that they cannot control how it all turns out. So give your foster children love, support, firmness, communication, respect and advice and then feel good about your efforts, even if the child rejects it all. If you expect yourself to do better than you can, you will not be an effective foster parent very long.

What Is and Isn't Normal?

It is important to consider what the word *normal* means. People sometimes confuse the word normal for something that is good, healthy, or desirable. In fact, there are many normal aspects of our lives that are none of these. For example, it may be normal to get a bad headache after having a very difficult and stressful day, but this headache is neither good, healthy, nor desirable. So the word normal really comes from the word norm which means something that regularly happens and is not unusual with a certain population.

It is then important to consider what is the norm among foster children. Just because something is unpleasant and unwanted does not make it abnormal. Where the question becomes very important is knowing when there is a moderate to serious problem that requires attention. Many normal problems require attention but an abnormal one may require special attention such as medical care, consultation with your caseworker, or some type of psychological counseling. With this in mind, let's

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take a look at a number of issues that arise with foster children in terms of whether they are or are not normal:

- **Attention-Getting Behavior** – The attempts of a child to gain the attention of those around them is a very normal motivation on their part. Normal motivation does not mean that any attempts that they take to gain attention are normal. For example, a major aspect of juvenile fire-setting is the attention that it draws, but this is a serious and abnormal way to get attention. Negative and unpleasant actions to get attention are also very normal with a population of foster children. Negative attention-getting is not, by itself, an abnormal or serious problem that needs outside help. If the attention-getting moves into the realm of violence, or physical or emotional harm to anyone in the family, then it moves into the realm of a serious concern that could potentially need outside help.
- **Anger** – All human beings get angry and fit into the norm and therefore this is a normal feeling response. Foster children often have many more reasons to be angry than the rest of us. It is normal for foster children to be angry frequently and sometimes it is not exactly clear what is causing their anger. Once again, the important issue is how the anger is expressed. If anger comes out in a violent or hurtful way, it steps over into the area of seriousness and will need some level of intervention.
- **Jealousy** – It is an instinctive drive in human beings for children to connect with adults who are strong and can protect them. When a child has gone through a disruptive family situation, the instinctive drive to connect with an adult is often more pronounced. Therefore, if for any reason a child's special status with an adult is threatened, jealousy is a very normal feeling. In fact, such jealousy would be considered very healthy and part of self-preservation. As with the feeling of anger, the way this jealousy is expressed determines the response that is needed. If the jealousy becomes all-consuming and motivates the child to explode in violence or become very withdrawn, this could be seen as abnormal and needing special attention.
- **Aggressiveness** – Survival is a major drive of a healthy human being. The fundamental reason human beings have the need to become aggressive is for self-preservation and protection. If a foster child becomes aggressive, the first question must be "is the child perceiving a personal threat." With many foster children, aggressiveness becomes a frequent method of getting what they want. Although this is common and therefore normal, it often poses a problem for foster parents. When foster children get angry, jealous, and aggressive, among other things it can be an indicator of the strength of the child to fight back in a world they do not understand and a world that treats

them in ways they do not like. This is important to understand when working with foster children so that these tendencies are not viewed simply as a problem to be solved.

- **Demanding** - When children become very demanding it is much like the drive to gain attention. With foster children, this often comes from the fact that basic necessities were not always made available to them and, even when they are in an environment where their needs are met, they may continue a mistaken belief that unless they are demanding they will be forgotten. It may take quite a bit of help, particularly for a neglected child, to understand that they will be cared for without the need to be aggressive or demanding. It is important to understand why these children act this way in order to have the patience to help them.
- **Sexual Behavior** - Most adults would prefer that children be asexual until they reach adulthood. The fact is that all human beings have sexual parts, sexual curiosities and sexual feelings. Children have never been exempt from this and never will be. Therefore, when children show themselves to be sexual beings this is normal. It is normal for a foster child to be curious about sexuality and to be interested in exploring sexual themes. This may include sexual talk, sexual pictures, masturbation or self-exploration, and attempts to involve other children in sexual play that is motivated by curiosity. These are all normal. At the same time, many foster children have been sexually abused so it becomes a much more complex situation. When children have been exposed to sexual behavior that is not age-appropriate, it is quite difficult to define what healthy sexual behavior would be beyond that point. Back to the concept of normal; for sexually abused foster children to act out sexually is quite normal. Even though it may be normal, it may also be cause to get some assistance in how to respond appropriately and to help them develop a healthy sexuality—something few of us are sure how to do particularly with sexually abused children.
- **Non-Compliance** - It is certainly a normal situation to have children, starting even very young stating their preferences, saying no and refusing to follow directions given by an adult. It would also be normal to have this happen more often in foster care than with other children. However, there is a level at which non-compliance can become not only abnormal, but a serious psychological problem. The deciding factor here is how often and under what conditions the child does not cooperate. Serious non-compliance often includes times when the child has simply developed a habit of disagreeing with everyone and everything. It may also include refusal to comply with steps required for their health such as taking medication or getting sufficient sleep. If a child disagrees simply to disagree and if it is a frequent occurrence

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and sometimes takes place when there is no particular reason other than just be disagreeable, this becomes more abnormal and a sign that special attention may be needed.

- **Distant** - Some foster children have learned to be distant for self-protection. They can be distant in a variety of ways including physical or emotional distance. Minor degrees of distance is normal in a population of foster children. If a child remains distant over long periods of time or refuses to accept affection, praise or love, even when it is genuine and the child needs these things, then this distance hurts them and has become a factor that may need special attention.
- **Lying** - Telling lies is not only normal for children but it also is a norm for adults as well (I bet you knew that already). Again, it is not desirable or positive, but it is normal. Lies that are told to avoid punishment or to have the adult hold the child in higher estimation are always normal. Some “lies” are closer to descriptions of fantasy that the child would like to be true. It is important to let the child know that, although they would prefer reality be a certain way, it is the way it is. When a foster child lies more than they tell the truth, when they lie for no apparent gain or reason, and when it becomes nearly impossible to tell when a statement is a lie or the truth, there may be need for professional assistance or outside help.
- **Hyperactive** - All parents have their own tolerance level for the activity of children. Some parents can put up with much more activity than others. Children are generally like puppies. They would prefer to run and jump than to sit still and listen. For a child to be very active is generally a sign of being healthy, even when it is very difficult on the care-provider. Abnormally hyper children are those who show an inability to be still for any reason. Children who have disturbed sleep patterns, who must move their hands and feet constantly, or appear to have very little control over what their body does, may need an outside evaluation to see if they have a hyperactive disorder.
- **Insecure** - For a foster child to feel and act insecure in a family placement when they have been there less than 12 months is completely normal. The reality is that they are not secure. The experience of many of these children is that they have been removed from their home often for reasons they do not know or understand. Many have also been moved from home to home, often without knowing in advance or being able to predict what would happen to them. Children who are outside their own family for any reason are usually insecure children at some level.

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- **Fears and Nightmares** – Children, as well as adults, can feel fearful while not completely understanding why at times. Fear in a foster child can result in withdrawal or aggressive behavior or in disturbed eating or sleeping patterns. Nightmares are usually the child playing out their fears in a dream context. These issues are very normal for many foster children. When nightmares are frequent, very disturbing or affecting the child's waking state, then there may be good reason to ask for outside help to determine how to meet the child's needs at that time.

- **Destructiveness** – It is a frequent occurrence and therefore normal for foster children to be destructive of property, either their own or others. One factor is that children communicate what is going on inside them more through behavior than through words. Being destructive could have several messages, including how angry, frustrated, jealous, or resentful the child is over a situation. When a child is unstable (which is frequent in foster care) it may be advisable not to expose them to expensive toys or gifts. Foster children frequently symbolically act out and treat something outside themselves the way they feel and therefore break or destroy even expensive gifts. A better choice would be gifts that are able to take a child's punishment and the child does not have to live with the fact that they have been destructive once again.

- **Self-Destructive** – Some level of feeling or acting self-destructive can be normal in foster care but if this goes very far, it is imperative that special attention be given to the child. For a variety of reasons, children may inflict harm upon themselves or even become suicidal. This may come from the child believing that the world would be better off, or their family would be better off, not having to be concerned with them. Sometimes children believe they have no other outlet for their anger than to hit themselves or even become reckless which can look like being accident prone. Not all accidents among children are truly accidents. It is important to take seriously what a child communicates through self-destructive actions. Young children are capable of causing serious damage to themselves and even taking their own lives. Suicidal talk is not highly unusual with foster children, but it is cause for concern and needs a special response.

In Summary

In many ways, foster children are like other children with their needs, desires and problems. However, there are other areas where foster children have their own unique concerns and methods of handling stress. One thing these children will require of us is the special patience and time it takes to work a little harder to understand how they feel and what their world is like for them. All children in foster care have experienced some level of disruption in their lives.

It is normal for human beings to express their concerns and problems in a variety of ways. Foster care needs to be a place where children can express who they are and how they feel. They need patience and understanding from foster parents who are willing and able to help them get by in a world that is often confusing and scary. The better the job we do, the more helpful we are to the child and the better we feel about our own contribution to their life.

Final thoughts... So what do you think? If it sounds like a lot more work than you thought, don't feel alone. Just consider how many parents, knowing all they would have to go through with their birth children, would be so anxious to go through with it. Make no mistake, parenting is the world's most complex and difficult job.

It is even more challenging if you have to pick up the pieces where someone else has failed. If all this is more than you can imagine, then get a pet. But if you want the ride of your life; if you want to be one of the most substantial influences in a young person's life; and if you want to learn more about yourself than you thought possible, then foster care is for you.