

A Family For Every Child Matching Assistance



*"We should not be asking who this child belongs to,
but who belongs to this child."*

Dealing with Stubborn & Challenging Behaviors

Children who have grown up in the foster care system may be labeled as "stubborn" or "chronically inflexible". Raising a stubborn child can be frustrating for parents, as it may seem that you are making no progress and are being defied at every turn. When it comes to a child who grew up in foster care, their stubbornness may be linked to their need to remain in control at all times.



Parenting a Stubborn Child

The following are some strategies for dealing with a stubborn child:

- **Distraction** - if you are getting ready to make a transition that may upset your child, distract them with something else. For example, if your child has a hard time getting into the car to go to school, talk to them about something fun they will be doing that day in school or later that day.
- **Give Options** - Children in foster care grew up in chaos, so they feel the need to always remain in control. In their minds, if they are in control they will survive. They have a hard time allowing another person to make decisions, so your child may throw a fit when you tell them "no". Instead, try and give them options whenever possible. For example, if there's a rule in your house that no one watches TV before bed but your child is insisting that they watch TV, instead of saying "No, you're not watching TV", tell your child "Watching TV is not a choice right now. Your choices are to either read a story or go straight to bed. Of those two choices, which one do you choose?" This still gives you the power and enforces the family rule (no TV before bed) but allows the child to feel they are in control by giving them alternatives (bedtime story or straight to bed) that they get to choose from.
- **Don't Yell** - It may be tempting to resort to yelling back at your child when you feel like you've reached the end of your rope, but that will only make the situation worse. Remain calm, and keep repeating your directions. If your child's behaviors are escalating, wait for them to calm down and approach them once they are calm.
- **Ask Questions** - Children usually act out because they are not getting some need met.

As their parent, it is your job to find out what that need is, and how you can meet it. Ask your child questions, like "Why are you upset?" and "What do you need?".

- **Be a Role Model** - Children learn a lot from watching their parents. A child in foster care may have witnessed a lot of conflict in his biological parent's home, which is where he/she may have picked up some of their stubborn behaviors. Model the type of behavior you want your child to exhibit.



Is It Normal?

When your child is acting out, it can be hard to tell what is "normal" behavior for their age, and what is related to their past trauma. Further complicating the issue is a child may be developmentally behind their chronological age, leaving a 9-year-old having the tantrums of a 4-year-old. The first step is to determine what your child's developmental age is in relation to their chronological age. Next, you need to decide what is "normal" behavior for a child of that age, and what may be related to their past trauma and abuse.

Toddlers (0-3 years old) - Tantrums; biting; using the word "No" in response to directives; hitting.

Preschool (4-5 years old) - Testing limits and boundaries; lies; argumentative; asks "Why?" constantly; may steal things

School-age (6-11 years old) - Stubborn; controlling; bossy; refusal to compromise or do things another way; not receptive to criticism.



Challenging Behaviors

The following behaviors fall under the "challenging" category:

Aggression
Self-harm
Disruptive
Inappropriate
Non-compliant
Repetitive

So what do you do in these types of situations? There are a number of strategies you may employ depending on the situation you are in.

If you feel that your child may harm themselves or another child, **remove them from the room/situation** so you can focus on him/her one-on-one without worrying about anyone else.

Keep a behavior log to look for patterns. Does the child exhibit certain behaviors when they are around specific people? Do the behaviors happen in certain settings (school, playground, at home) or during a certain time of day? What was said before the child started acting out? Looking for clues that may trigger a child to exhibit challenging behaviors allows you to take steps to reduce the likelihood that they will happen.

For younger children **distraction** is a great technique to use to get them to focus on something else. Also, you can **turn it into a game**. If your child is on the verge of throwing a tantrum because they do not want to leave the house to go to school and you need them to get their shoes on, you could say "Let's see who can get their shoes on faster, you or Mommy/Daddy".

Children in foster care thrive on **consistency**, so be sure to keep your child informed of what is happening next and if there are going to be any changes to his/her daily routine.

Let your child calm down before you try and talk to them about their behavior, and how they could react instead next time. When your child is upset and crying or yelling, you will not be able to reason with them or have a constructive discussion.

Use directives, and not commands. Instead of saying "Stop hitting me!", say "Tell me with your words what is wrong". Your child will be more receptive to you speaking to him/her in a calm manner using receptive words instead of reactive words.

Recognize and compliment positive behaviors. It's easy to catch your child misbehaving and re-directing him/her in those situations. It's a lot harder to remember to praise your child for their good behavior. It can be as simple as saying "Thank you for using your words when you wanted ____!" or "Thank you for clearing your plate after dinner". This reinforces positive behavior.



Additional Information & Resources

[*The Challenging Child: Understanding, Raising and Enjoying the Five "Difficult" Types of Children*](#) by Stanley I. Greenspan and Jacqueline Salmon

[*The Connected Child*](#) by Dr. Karyn Purvis, David R. Cross and Wendy Lyons Sunshine

Creating a Family - [Parenting the Easily Frustrated Inflexible Child](#)

The Daily Parent - [Children with Challenging Behaviors](#)

[*The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*](#) by Ross W. Greene

Jasper Mountain - [Mission Impossible](#)

Livestrong.com - [Stubborn Behavior in Kids](#)

New Kids Center - [Dealing with a Stubborn Child](#)

Psychology Today - [The Highly Sensitive \(and Stubborn\) Child](#)

[Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach](#) by Howard Glasser and Jennifer Easley

