Effective Discipline

There are a couple major factors to consider when discipling your adopted child. The first is their developmental age vs. their chronological age, keeping in mind that the two may be very different. The second factor to consider is their past. This will effect how you handle discipline. For example, using a time-out will not be very effective for a child who was abandoned or locked in a room for days on end; instead, this will exacerbate their trauma and they will believe that you are no different than the parents who abused and/or neglected them.

There are also many effective methods of discipline - social modeling, encouragement, consequences, reward charts, rules, etc. But before you can employ some of these methods, you must first use three strategies suggested by Dr. Karyn Purvis, author of the acclaimed book The Connected Child. They are: empowering, connecting, and correcting. By using these three methods first, only then will behavior be changed effectively.

Empowering

Empowering all has to do with the child's body and brain, and the signals it is sending an receiving. Empowering your child really comes down to meeting his/her physical needs. Children who have experienced trauma are affected greatly by changes in their insulin receptor activities. This mean that when they have high or low blood sugar, negative behaviors will result. When blood sugar goes down, cortisol levels will go up which can also trigger negative behaviors.

In This Issue

Empowering
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Additional Information & Resources

Child Welfare League - Discipline Techniques

Effective Discipline Strategies for Adoptive and Foster Parents webinar with Dr. Karyn Purvis (it's free!)

Empowered to Connect - Resources

Empowered to Connect - The IDEAL Response for Parents video

Focus on the Family - Healthy Discipline for Adopted Children

in addition to changes in their insulin receptors, children who have experienced trauma either in utero or within the first year of life are susceptive to changes in a neuro-chemical site in their brain called glutamite. Glutamite spikes are often associated with things like seizures, irrational behaviors, blacking out, rages, etc. These spikes are often higher in a person who is dehydrated as well.

It's also important to remember to balance out structure and nurture; there should be equal or close to equal amounts of each. If your child needs more structure, make sure to provide a little more nurture as well.

To help empower your child, you must keep them fed. Every few hours, give your child a healthy snack that is full in protein and good nutrients. This may be especially important for children who have food issues. For days that your child is at school and where you have no control over their eating schedule, talk with your child's teacher about allowing an additional snack time for your child, either in the classroom or at the school counselor's office. Even if your child does not go to the counselor's office to collect their snack, just knowing it is there if they need it may be enough.

Connecting

Humans are hard-wired to make connections with each other. From the time we are babies, we are drawn to other human faces and by the desire to connect with them. A child who has faced abuse and neglect will find it harder to connect. Deep bonds are formed from day 1 of birth, so a child who comes into your family at the age of 9 will not have that connection with you right away. As a result, it will be your job to build it overtime. You can do this through playful learning, compliments, carving out time to play with your child, and depending on the type of trauma your child endured, through small touches like a hand on the shoulder.

One of the best connection strategies is to make time with your child every day, even if it's just 15-minutes of uninterrupted play time. The key here is that it needs to be free from distractions - no phones, no computers, etc. Just you and your child. You also need to let them choose what you will play together.

A great majority of negative behavior comes out of not being able to connect with others, and the strong

desire to connect. So if your child is misbehaving, ask yourself if their negative behavior is in response to a missed connection.

Correcting

After you have empowered your child and connected with your child, you can move into correcting their behavior. You can do this by using the IDEAL response:

Immediate - Respond within 1-3 seconds of your child's behavior, whether it's positive or negative, if you want your child to learn. Respond using praise, encouragement, or re-directing.

Direct - Let your child know what you want them to do/not do. Get down on your child's level, and be close to them, about 3' feet away. If you can, touch your child on their shoulder or hold their hands. You want to convey to your child that you are very present.

Efficient - Gauge your response based on the actions:

Level 1 - playful responses
Level 2 - choices
Level 3 - compromises (lets your child know they have choices and that you are trying to connect with them)

Action-based - Lectures will not work with a younger child. Instead, they learn by actions, or "motor-memory".

Level at behavior - Make it clear to your child that the discipline is related to their behavior, and **not** them. My parents used to tell me "we love you, we just don't love your behavior right now". That told me that even when I was misbehaving, my parents still loved me. That's a very powerful message that needs to be communicated to a child who likely struggles with attachment and feelings of abandonment.

For more information on how to implement the IDEAL Response, see the "IDEAL Response for Parents video" in the Additional Resources and Information section.