Tantrums and Aggression

It is highly probable that children in the foster care system have experienced some level of trauma in their lives. The level of trauma they have experienced can have an effect on their behaviors, coping skills, and reactions to certain situations. These behaviors can manifest themselves in the form of tantrums and aggression. When a child reacts in this manner, parents can find this to be incredibly overwhelming, and sometimes scary. This newsletter will outline suggestions for parents as to how best respond when your child is throwing a tantrum and displaying aggressive behaviors, and steps you can take to pre-empt a child's meltdown.

Responding to physical and/or verbal aggression

There are a few steps parents should take when responding to aggression:

Reduce access to others: Have other children or adults leave the room when you sense an aggressive episode is about to occur. This will minimize the risk of harm to others, and may help reduce the anxiety your child may be feeling at the current moment.

Establish feasible norms and expectations: Talking with your child about the rules of the home is important. Make sure that he/she understands what they are from the start. Work with your child on coming up with solutions for ways they can better respond to certain situations that may trigger their trauma.

Avoid confrontations: Whenever possible, avoid escalating the situation by refusing to participate in any confrontational behavior. Suggest to the child that you talk later in private when they have calmed down, or simply walk away. It may be hard to not get the last word in, but it will be better in the long run if you don't.

Use non-verbals: Instead of using commands, which can come off as harsh and nagging, use non-verbal signals to communicate with your child. Children who are prone to aggressive behaviors respond better to non-verbal commands than verbal ones.

Intervene as early as possible: Picking up on signals that your child is headed for a melt down can help stop aggressive behaviors and tantrums before they start. Remove your child from the situation or giving them another task to do are two ways that you can distract your child and head off any tantrums.

Working to prevent future aggressive episodes

There are a few things parents can do to work to prevent future aggressive episodes:

Do a functional assessment: A functional assessment determines what purpose aggressive behaviors serve the child, what physical or social factors are linked with the behavior, and what styles of communication also are linked to aggressive behaviors and tantrums.

Notice the warning signs: Every child will exhibit different warning signs that he/she is headed for a meltdown, but some common ones are: clenched fists, turning red, swearing, glaring, narrowing their eyes, crying, questioning, arguing, and turning silent are just a few warning signs.

Create an individual crisis management plan: The crisis management plan can help parents determine what triggers the child's aggressive behavior, and what methods are effective and ineffective. The crisis management plan should be individual to each child, and should include the following:

- When the aggressive behaviors occurred
- Where they occurred
- Who was around when they occurred
- What events took place prior to the aggressive outburst
- What behavioral warning signs did the child exhibit prior to the incident
- What actions were taken by the parent to de-escalate the situation
- Where the actions effective
- What the consequences were

Positive techniques to deal with aggression

Parents may employ the following techniques to prevent aggressive outbursts and tantrums over time:

Reinforce positive behaviors: Praising the child throughout the day is one way to reinforce positive behaviors, so negative behaviors and actions will slowly lessen over time. Making comments such as "I really appreciated you helping your brother clean up" or "I like how you completed your chores without being reminded" tell the child when they are doing something good, and that you notice their actions. Children do things (both positive and negative) to get your attention, so reinforcing the positive behaviors makes them more inclined to do those.

Ignore negative behaviors that are tolerable: Whenever possible, ignore negative behaviors that are not going to cause harm to the child or someone/thing else. Be consistent when ignoring certain behaviors to reinforce that they are not appropriate.

Provide other outlets: Providing opportunities for children to exercise and work out their energy can help prevent aggressive behaviors from occurring. Enrolling your child in sports, dance classes, and encouraging them to play outside whenever possible to work out extra energy can help reduce aggressive behaviors.

Move closer to your child: If your child is expressing frustration, move closer to him/her. This method has a calming effect on younger children, especially ones who have higher emotional needs.

Provide explanations: Helping your child understand why they are frustrated can help your child learn how to react in a proper manner in the future. Talk to your child about why they are frustrated, and provide possible causes if you have an idea why.

Use social modeling: Children learn from watching you, so modeling appropriate social behaviors teach the child what is appropriate and what is not in certain situations.

Encourage verbal expression: Teaching your child to express their emotions and feelings

verbally gives them a better way to express their feelings, and reduces the likelihood that they will act out inappropriately.

For more suggestions, please visit About.com Plain Talk About...Dealing with the Angry Child

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Service

Handling aggression at a various ages

How you handle your child's aggression will vary based on their age. The following are some suggestions on how to handle your child's aggressive behaviors based on their age:

Preschool/Kindergarten age:

- Be consistent in how you respond to their behaviors
- Remove your child from the situation
- Be clear in your expectations
- Use time-outs
- Work as a team with the other people that care for your child- your partner, your child's teacher, etc.

Elementary age:

- Communicate with your child's school and teachers
- Make sure there are consequences to your child's behaviors at school and find out what they are
- Discuss your child's aggressive behaviors at school with him/her at home
- Do some problem-solving with your child, and come up with a plan for how they could respond the next time they find themselves in a similar situation
- Outline clear expectations for their behaviors at home, and establish consequences

Adolescents and teenagers:

- Provide suggestions better problem-solving strategies, rather than using physical aggression
- Correct problems in the moment, and have a conversation about them later
- Focus on how your child should avoid getting into trouble and receiving consequences

For more detailed suggestions on how to work with your child's aggressive behaviors at their various ages, please visit the Empowering Parents website and read the article How to Manage Aggressive Child Behavior.

Resources

You may find the following additional information and resources beneficial:

CYC-Online - Practical Strategies for Working With Students Who Display Aggression and Violence

> While this guide is aimed at teachers and strategies to use in the classroom, parents may find the tips helpful and may give this guide to their child's teacher to use as well.

American Academy of Pediatrics and Dave Thomas Foundation - Parenting After Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs

> This guide will help parents understand a child's past trauma, which are often the root of their aggressive behaviors and tantrums.

Empowering Parents - Parenting Articles about Abusive and Violent Behavior

> This resource list will provide parents with information on how to handle their children's violent behaviors.

Aggression and and Antisocial Behavior in Children and Adolescents: Research and Treatment by Daniel F. Connor

> This book examines the origins, development, outcomes, and treatment of antisocial behaviors in children and teenagers.

Children's Friendship Training by Fred D. Frankel, Robert Myatt This book examines children's behaviors and provides suggestions to reinforce social skills and friendships.

Labor of the Heart: A Parent's Guide to the Decisions and Emotions in Adoption by Kathleen L. Whitten

> This book is aimed at helping adoptive parents work through the emotions they experience during the ups and downs of the adoption process.