



# **Parenting Physically Aggressive Children and Youth Washington Edition Participants Guide**

Washington State Edition  
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University of Southern Maine

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### **Training Goal:**

To assist families in understanding and managing physically aggressive behaviors in children and youth.

### **Learning Objectives:**

1. Parents will learn that approaches to parenting and managing children with aggressive behaviors depend on the child's developmental stage.
2. Parents will be able to define aggression in children and youth.
3. Parents will develop a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to aggressive behaviors in children.
4. Parents will learn a variety of techniques that will assist them in managing aggressive behaviors.
5. Parents will learn some resources and some strategies for self-care to assist them in dealing with aggressive behaviors of children.

## Unit

# 1

## Laying the Foundation – Review/Refresher of Fundamental Information

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Trauma has long-term impacts on children. The experience of abuse, neglect, removal from their birth family, has implications that can affect their responses and behaviors throughout their lifetime. In addition, attachment issues play a significant role in how children behave and how they respond to adult intervention.

### The Impact of Trauma

[Source: Understanding Traumatized and Maltreated Children: the Six Core Concepts, Bruce D. Perry, MD. The Child Trauma Academy, Houston, TX, 1999]

- The Human brain is wired by experience. If children experience trauma, abuse, and neglect, their brains will be wired in a way that expects and anticipates those outcomes.
- The brain is malleable. It can change. Change takes time. Children who have been abused, neglected or traumatized need literally thousands of positive sensory experiences to change their brain's wiring.
- The brain continues to grow and develop after the third year of life.
- Teenagers, in particular, have huge window of opportunity to form new connections within their brain and to rewire those connections.
- The unique wiring in children who have been traumatized, can and often leads to significant delays in one or more areas of development.
- There are youth in care with developmental delays and function at levels younger than their actual age.

To illustrate this point, let's look at how Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (one example of prenatal trauma through exposure to alcohol before birth), can affect development.

Impact of FAS on a child;

- Physical development
- Cognitive development
- Social development
- Emotional development
- Learning abilities
- Intrusive, poor judgement
- Behavior problems
- Lacking understanding of cause and effect

An FAS18-year old person's strengths do not necessarily serve him well. Someone looking at him first notices his size and physical maturity. Because his expressive skills are advanced, he presents with an exaggerated level of development/capability. Consider his emotional maturity and his social skills – would you let a 6-year old drive a car? Go on a date? Stay alone overnight? Your discipline approaches must match a child's stage of development/ comprehension, rather than a chronological age.

Past history and experience often explains why children behave in certain ways i.e., food hoarding for the child who has been deprived). Whenever you are working with children in Departmental Custody, you need to keep in mind the Discipline policies of the Department. They are included in a handout for your review.

## **Washington State Policy on Discipline**

Attached is the agreement regarding WA policy on discipline.

CHILDREN'S ADMINISTRATION  
 DIVISION OF LICENSED RESOURCES  
**POLICY AGREEMENTS**

NAME [REDACTED]	DATE [REDACTED]
<b>PLEASE SIGN EACH SECTION</b>	
<b>DISCIPLINE</b>	
<p><b><u>WAC 388-148-0465:</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) You are responsible for disciplining children in your care. This responsibility may not be delegated to a child.</li> <li>2) Discipline must be based on an understanding of the child's needs and state of development.</li> <li>3) Discipline must be designed to help the child under your care to develop inner control, acceptable behavior and respect for the rights of others.</li> <li>4) Discipline must be fair, reasonable, consistent and related to the child's behavior.</li> </ol> <p><b><u>WAC 288-148-0470:</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) I will not use cruel, unusual, frightening, unsafe or humiliation discipline practices, including but not limited to:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Spanking children with a hand or object;</li> <li>b) Biting, jerking, kicking, hitting, or shaking the child;</li> <li>c) Pulling the child's hair;</li> <li>d) Throwing the child;</li> <li>e) Purposely inflicting pain as a punishment;</li> <li>f) Name calling, using derogatory comments;</li> <li>g) Threatening the child with physical harm;</li> <li>h) Threatening or intimidating the child; or</li> <li>i) Placing or requiring a child to stand under a cold water shower.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2) I will not use methods that interfere with a child's basic needs. These include, but are not limited to:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Depriving the child of sleep;</li> <li>b) Providing inadequate food, clothing or shelter;</li> <li>c) Restricting a child's breathing;</li> <li>d) Interfering with a child's ability to take care of their own hygiene and toilet needs; or</li> <li>e) Providing inadequate medical or dental care.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3) I will not use methods that deprive a child of necessary services. These include, but are not limited to, contacting:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The assigned social worker;</li> <li>b) The assigned legal representative;</li> <li>c) Parents or other family members who are identified in the case plan; or</li> <li>d) Individuals providing the child with therapeutic activities as part of the child's case plan.</li> </ol> </li> <li>4) I will not use medications for a child that has been prescribed for someone else.</li> <li>5) I will not physically lock doors or windows in a way that prohibits a child from exiting.</li> </ol>	
FOSTER PARENT SIGNATURE [REDACTED]	DATE: [REDACTED]
FOSTER PARENT SIGNATURE [REDACTED]	DATE: [REDACTED]
<p>Please use this space to describe your discipline practices using examples and specific age groups:</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>	

## Contrasting Discipline and Punishment

Effective and positive discipline skills are crucial to all parenting. Foster and adopted children often do not react to discipline in the same manner due to traumatic situations. Positive discipline skills are effective at;

- Protecting and nurturing children's physical and psychological well-being.
- Advancing children's development.
- Meeting children's needs.
- Teaching ways to prevent and solve problems.
- Maintaining and building the parent/child relationship
- Helping children develop self-control and responsibility
- Producing desired behavior

The purpose of punishment is to control, coerce, or shame a child into acting a certain way. The control is external not internal. Child can get negative messages from punishment even when not intended.

It is important to keep in mind the child's history, developmental stage, and unique temperament when disciplining. For example, sending a child to their room for a time out (if in past they were locked in their room for days) might evoke strong feelings of fear and anxiety.

### Some guiding principles of positive discipline:

- Model respectful behavior
- Make sure children know what you expect of them, be consistent and reasonable
- Respond effectively by taking the time to identify the meaning behind the behavior
- Choose consequences which are reasonable and provide learning experiences

Effective discipline fosters:

- Foster high self esteem
- Promote moral development
- Increase problem solving skills



## Some Techniques of Positive Discipline

- Restitution: Require child to do something specific and concrete to make up for misdeed.
- Choices: Give them choices of actions as long as outcome is acceptable
- Redirection: If acting inappropriately encourage alternative activities.
- Time-out: Have child take a break to calm down. A break in the activity. Usually this is one minute for every year of child's age.
- Time-in: keep them within sight or spend more time with them.
- Privileges based on behavior: Link child's greater independence to good judgement and control.
- Reward positive behavior: Simple acknowledgement of positive behavior.
- Natural consequences: Outcome when no intervention takes place. No clean clothes when teen doesn't do laundry.
- Logical consequences: Connects penalty directly to the misbehavior.
- Point System: Give points for desired behavior. Accumulation of points results in a reward.
- Choose battles: Sometimes not reacting to or ignoring misbehavior is an effective response.

## Unit

# 2

## Understanding Anger and Aggression

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### Defining Aggression

What is Aggression? How do you know when your child is angry or upset?

- Throw books and toys
- Hits and kicks
- Spits
- Stomps around
- Huffs and puffs and acts angry but never tells you why
- Yells
- Slams doors
- Punches walls
- Swears
- Shuts down/ doesn't talk
- Self-abuse/ Self harm
- Pouts
- Sneaky/retaliatory – instigates so others get into trouble
- Tattling
- Lying – allegations
- Stealing
- Breaking things (Own or someone else's)

- Vandalism – defacing others’ property
- Cries

The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry states that “Violent behavior in children and adolescents can include a wide range of behaviors: explosive temper tantrums, physical aggression, fighting, threats or attempts to hurt others (including homicidal thoughts), use of weapons, cruelty toward animals, fire setting, intentional destruction of property and vandalism.”

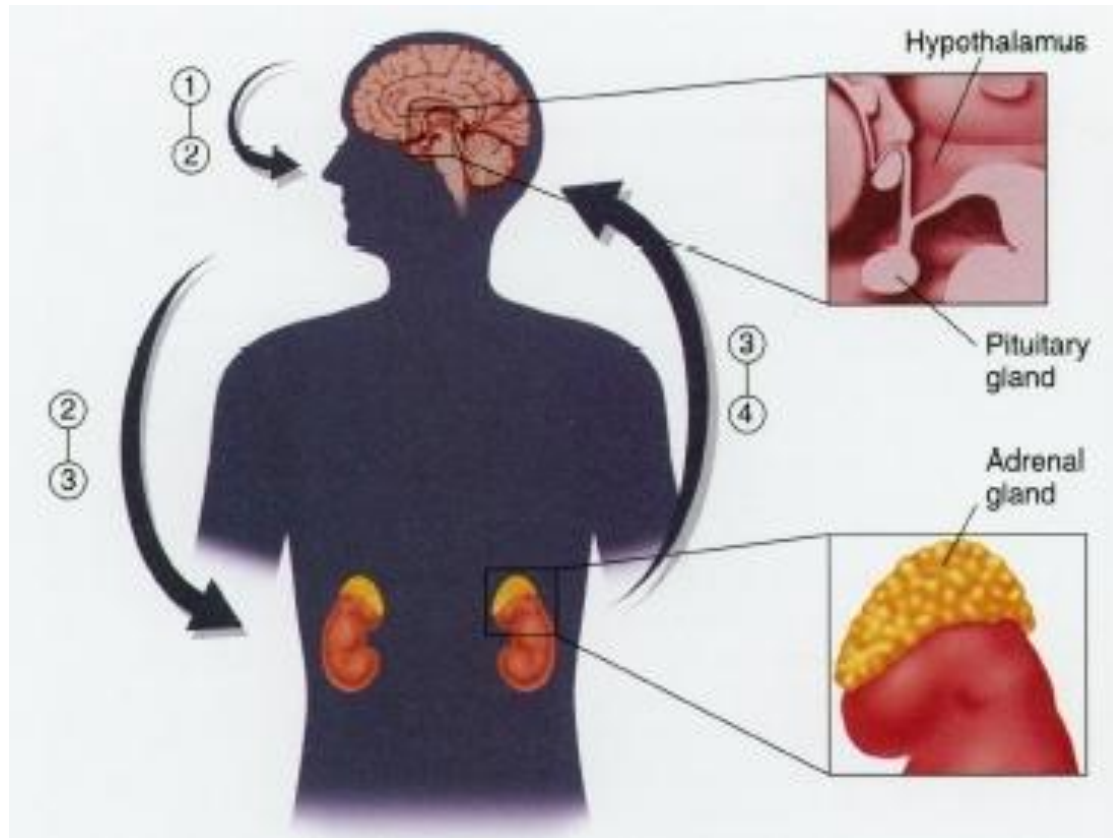
[Source: Facts for Families, No. 55, Updated March 2001]

In adolescents, some relational aggression (ostracizing, spreading a rumor about someone) plays a distinct role in social status among peers, especially girls. Peers dislike physical aggression less over time; adolescents who have gained popularity will use both relational and physically aggressive behavior to maintain dominant, influential position within their peer group. So parents and others are battling intense peer pressure when we attempt to diminish physically aggressive behavior among adolescents whose social standing is enhanced because of it.

[Source: Child Development, Volume 75, Aggression and Social Status by A.H.N. Cillessen and L. Mayeux. Copyright 2004. The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc.]

Children and youth who are agitated or aggressive are undergoing physiological changes in their bodies. We will briefly review what the body’s response is to stress hormones.

## Physiological changes



[Diagram source: <http://www.humanillnesses.com/Behavioral-Health-Sel-Vi/Stress.html>]

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The **hypothalamus** signals the **adrenal glands** to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert. Pupils dilate to improve vision. The liver releases some of its stored glucose to increase the body's energy. And sweat is produced to cool the body. All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

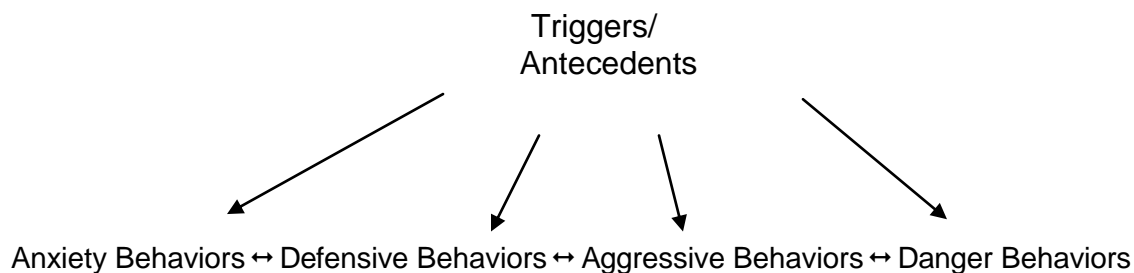
This natural reaction is known as the stress response. Working properly, the body's stress response enhances a person's ability to perform well under pressure. But the stress response can also cause problems when it overreacts or fails to turn off and reset itself properly. [Text source: [www.kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/emotions/stress.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/stress.html)]

Think of the "fight or flight" physiological reaction our bodies have to crises. Because the reaction is automatic, controlled by the sympathetic nervous system, there is no conscious control of the changes in our body during a crisis. Thinking clearly when stressed, agitated or angry is difficult for most of us - not just children - due to the changes in our body and the intense emotions.

Although this stress reaction is out of our control, if we are taught to recognize signs of agitation and escalation, we can calm ourselves and perhaps slow or interrupt the process. If we can recognize it in ourselves, this will help us as we work with angry and aggressive children and youth.

## What Agitation/Escalation Looks Like

Keeping in mind these physiological changes in the human body, let's think about children and youth who become angry and aggressive. Given that there are changes in the body, there are likely to be recognizable signs that a child or youth is becoming agitated. We will describe agitation through four levels of behaviors- 'Anxiety,' 'Defensive,' 'Aggressive,' and 'Danger.'



Agitation is not necessarily a progression of behaviors and reactions; however it can be. A child can escalate - jump from zero to sixty – that is, go from calm to aggressive behavior - like a rocket. S/he can land anywhere on this continuum.

### The Four Levels of Agitation

<u>Level One</u>		
<b>Anxiety Behavior:</b> the perceived possibility of some threat, or lack of need fulfillment, that is not a threat to survival.		
Feels Like...	Looks Like...	Sounds Like...
Heart Pumping Shortness of breath Tingling Bombarded Worried Problem is unsolvable	Sweating Pacing Twitching Fidgeting	Chattering Staying on same subject
<p><b>Response Techniques for Anxiety Behavior: Focus on being supportive and non-judgmental. Use reflective listening to respond to the content and feelings being expressed. Be positive and reassuring.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ask open-ended questions and listen to the answers.</li> <li>2. Respond to both the feelings being expressed and the content being communicated.</li> <li>3. Give non-judgmental feedback that summarizes the person's view.</li> <li>4. Offer alternatives in a supportive manner.</li> </ol> <p><u>Examples for Practice</u> (how would you use the above steps to help a child experiencing anxiety behavior due to the following):</p> <p>Child feels left out by peers.            Child has to go to bed earlier than sibling.            Child has to do a report in front of class.            Child has to have immunizations/ go to the doctor.</p>		

## The Four Levels of Agitation, Continued

<b>Level Two</b>		
<b>Defensive Behavior:</b> the person focuses more intently on surviving the crisis, causing their hearing, seeing and thinking to become more focused and narrow.		
Feels Like...	Looks Like...	Sounds Like...
<p>Stuck on idea or problem Can't move on</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Heart Pumping Shortness of breath Tingling Bombarded Worried Problem is unsolvable</p>	<p>Protective of space but quick to crowd others Doesn't seem to listen Can't sit still</p> <p><b>Still Present:</b> Sweating Pacing Twitching Fidgeting</p>	<p>Rapid Speech Loud</p> <p><b>Still Present:</b> Chattering Staying on same subject</p>
<p><b>Response Techniques for Defensive Behavior:</b> Concentrate on turning down the heat. Defensiveness can or will escalate into aggressive behavior unless you intervene. You should try to work at getting through to the sensory (visual and auditory) shutdown.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Maintain a comfortable distance and use body language and voice tone to gain attention.</li> <li>2. Describe the current behavior and how it differs from usual or baseline behavior.</li> <li>3. Ask open-ended questions to gather information, or make statements that help the person think about their behavior and connect their choices with consequences.</li> </ol> <p><u>Examples for Practice</u> (how would you use the above steps to help a child experiencing defensive behavior due to the following):</p> <p>Child has been purposely left out by peers and states, "everyone is out to get me."            Child has to go to bed earlier than sibling and sibling has teased the child about it.            Child has done something wrong and gotten caught but won't admit it.            Child has not done something he promised to do.</p>		

## The Four Levels of Agitation, Continued

<b><u>Level Three</u></b>		
<b><u>Aggressive Behavior:</u></b> Built up energy begins to be released. This is displayed by incessant questioning, refusal to cooperate, and verbal attacks. The person's sensors are narrowed and focused on the built up energy.		
<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;"><b>Feels Like...</b></p> <p>High energy</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Heart Pumping Shortness of breath Tingling Bombarded Worried Problem is unsolvable Stuck on idea/problem Can't move on</p>	<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;"><b>Looks Like...</b></p> <p>Non-verbal behavior Protects personal space Face may redden Muscles tighten May throw items</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Sweating Pacing Twitching Fidgeting Protective of space but quick to crowd others Doesn't seem to listen Can't sit still</p>	<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;"><b>Sounds Like...</b></p> <p>Incessant questioning Refusals to comply Verbal attacks</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Chattering Staying on same subject Rapid Speech Loud</p>
<p><b>Response Techniques for Aggressive Behavior:</b> The focus should be on moving the person from emotion (the non-thinking) to content (thinking). Define appropriate behavior, set limits and give choices. Remember to keep your voice levels normal (DO NOT get angry along with youth) and maintain a non-threatening stance.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Acknowledge the youth's behavior.</li> <li>2. Clearly define appropriate behavior and set limits or expectations.</li> <li>3. Ask, "What do you want?"</li> <li>4. If the "want" is reasonable, ask, "Is what you are doing going to get you what you want?"</li> <li>5. Give the youth a choice.</li> <li>6. Withdraw and wait quietly.</li> </ol>		



Examples for Practice (how would you use the above steps to help a child experiencing danger behavior due to the following):

Child yells at peers saying, "I'm going to get you! I'll make you sorry!"

Child throws a toy toward sibling and says, "I'd like to pound your face in!"

Child slams door and pounds walls.

Child smashes toys or other objects deliberately.

## The Four Levels of Agitation, Continued

<b>Level Four</b>		
<p><b><u>Danger Behavior:</u></b> The person's energy is focused into fight or flight survival reaction. There is a high probability of an attempt at threat completion. The verbal attack becomes very focused and more intense.</p>		
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Feels Like...</p> <p>Muscle tension Ready to explode Out of control</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Heart Pumping Shortness of breath Tingling Bombarded Worried Problem is unsolvable Stuck on idea/problem Can't move on High energy</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Looks Like...</p> <p>Feet spaced apart Neck muscles prominent Eyes set and glaring Fists clenched Throwing items toward you</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Sweating Pacing Twitching Fidgeting Protective of space but quick to crowd others Doesn't seem to listen Can't sit still Non-verbal behavior Protects personal space Face is red Muscles are tight May throw items</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold;">Sounds Like...</p> <p>Verbal attack is toward others, property or self Rage Persistence</p> <p><b>Still present:</b> Chattering Staying on same subject Rapid Speech Loud Incessant questioning Refusals to comply Verbal attacks</p>
<p><b>Response Techniques for Danger Behavior:</b> The focus needs to be on safety.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Take threats seriously.</li> <li>2. Increase the distance between you and youth.</li> <li>3. Have all unnecessary people leave the room.</li> <li>4. Look for escape routes, obstacles in the room to put between the two of you.</li> <li>5. Maintain non-threatening body language.</li> <li>6. Stay calm, as sudden actions can precipitate a violent reaction, or panic, in</li> </ol>		

a dangerous person.

7. Follow crisis plan and call for help (911 if necessary).

Examples for Practice (how would you use the above steps to help a child experiencing danger behavior due to the following):

Child is trying to push past you to get to peers or sibling to attack.

Child is trying to kick in plate glass door.

Child is attempting to attack animals or other people in your home.

Child is doing major property damage (smashing windshields, etc.)

Anger is “a natural and mostly automatic response to pain of one form or another (physical or emotional).” Anger, like our other emotions, is a physiological as well as an emotional response, in this case to pain or fear. The type of pain does not matter – only that the pain is unpleasant. And the pain must be accompanied by some anger-triggering thought, some assessment or perception of a situation that makes a person believe that someone else is trying to hurt them (whether or not the perception is accurate). Anger can be triggered by memories of traumatic or enraging events. Anger is always directed at a target, even if the target is one’s self. And anger, like our other emotions, can vary in intensity from mildly annoyed to completely enrage.

So what happens internally when a person gets angry? Anger is an intense form of stress. This stimulates the central nervous system and puts the entire body in a general state of alert. The body’s “fight or flight” responses are triggered. Blood pressure rises. Muscles contract. A child or adult who is already grumpy, irritable, or depressed will become more easily aroused to anger than someone who is not.

Anger can also be used as a substitute emotion for pain. Some adults (and many children) can make themselves angry because then they don’t have to feel pain. It is better to be angry than to be in pain. And this is a transition that can occur consciously or unconsciously.

What are the advantages of being angry rather than being in pain? Anger is a distraction. Children who are hurting often think about their hurt and focus on it. Angry people, on the other hand, usually turn their attention outward, to think about hurting or “getting even” with those that have hurt them. Anger is thus a really effective means of not having to recognize and deal with painful emotions and feelings, with fear and vulnerability.

A sense of self-righteousness that is often associated with anger can temporarily boost self-esteem. It is far more satisfying to feel angry than to acknowledge painful feelings of fear or vulnerability. Instead of feeling afraid or vulnerable, anger can make us feel powerful and in control of what can be frightening situations.

### **So why is anger a problem?**

It’s not, depending on how it’s managed. In fact, the survival instincts that anger triggers can be crucial in dangerous situations. Getting the real feelings underlying the anger out in a healthy way, dealing with them, facing them head-on, seems to be the key to overcoming the long-term potential effects of continuous anger. Constant stress and anger, and the physiological reactions that go along with those feelings, can lead to headaches, cramps, insomnia, and more serious physical ailments, including heart disease, colitis and gastrointestinal disorders.

What are the other problems associated with anger? People who are angry and who lash out at others can end up in jail, ostracized from their peers, fired from their jobs, suspended or expelled from their schools, and can spiral into depression and anger cycles that can become overwhelming.

Our goal is to help children appropriately express, and not suppress, their anger.

We need to teach children to express their anger in ways that let others know how they are feeling, while being respectful of themselves and others. Children need to learn the difference between being assertive and being aggressive, in many instances.

At the same time, we want to make sure that children understand that expressing their anger is not only OK, it's healthy – but that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to do so. Suppressing anger can lead to health issues and/or depression.

**What helps? What techniques are recommended for adults and kids who are angry? What are some strategies to reduce anger and its negative effects?**

1. Relaxation techniques:

- Deep breathing – from the diaphragm. If a child doesn't know how to breathe from his or her diaphragm, have them lay on their back on the floor. Ask them to breathe in and out in a way that makes their tummy go up and down. This is the easiest way to determine if someone is breathing from their diaphragm. It doesn't mean that children always have to lie on the floor when they are angry. But it can be a technique that they use to gain “muscle memory” for deep breathing. Often a child's deep breaths are just breathing from their chest – and those are not relaxing in the same way that diaphragm breathing can be.
- Slow repetition of a calming word while deep breathing can help, as can counting.
- Visualization can help to ward off intense anger.
- Calming exercises, such as those in yoga, are helpful in managing stress and reducing the intensity of angry feelings.

2. Problem solving:

- Help a child identify the circumstances or feelings that are making them angry. Then help them come up with some ideas that can make those circumstances or feelings less painful or threatening. For example, if a child is really mad at his birth parents, how can he express how he or she is feeling in a way that is OK and healthy? Some ideas (will need to adjust depending on the child's emotional age).

- Typing the letter to nowhere. One technique that is helpful for children to express their anger is to allow them to sit down at a computer and compose a letter to the person at whom they are angry. The rules are simple. They are allowed to write ANYTHING at all in this letter. They can write how they feel, why they're mad, what they wish they could do about it, even use swear words if they want. The catch is this – they are not allowed to print the letter, to save the letter, or to send the letter. When they have “vented,” they must erase the letter. This allows children to gather their thoughts, express their feelings, and get the feelings out, rather than keep them bottled up inside.
- Write, Don't Fight. Encourage kids to journal their emotions, to learn to express them with words, in a way that is not harmful.
- Sometimes kids need some immediate physical outlet for that rush of adrenaline they are feeling. If physical activity or play is not an option, or is not safe, have the child tear up old telephone books. They can see how many pages they can tear at a time. This is a directed way to use their physical anger safely and appropriately, and other than a mess, harms nothing. The books are still recyclable even after they have been torn.
- For very young children who are having trouble controlling their urge to be aggressive, directing that to a safe outlet during the process of teaching them to manage their anger more constructively can be a big help.

Now, when the child has calmed down after expressing his or her rage through one of these approved techniques, help them explore how they can solve the problem that caused them to feel that angry. The reality is, that sometimes the problems can't be solved. We can't solve a birth parent's inability to parent, or their addiction, or their abandonment, or their death. But we can help to guide a child through the feelings in a way that won't hurt others.

For those problems that can be solved, or at least reduced, help the child develop an action plan. For example, what if a child is angry because his brother took one of his favorite toys and broke it? How could the child “fix” that problem?



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## Anger Management Fact Sheet for Teens

### Introduction

Anger is a normal human emotion. It can be caused by anything from a friend's annoying behavior to worries about personal problems or memories of a troubling life event.

When handled in a positive way, anger can help people stand up for themselves and fight injustices. On the other hand, anger can lead to violence and injury when not addressed positively. This fact sheet is meant to help teens understand and control anger.

### What is anger?

Anger is an emotional state that can range from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Feelings of anger actually produce physical changes in the body such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline.

### When does anger become a problem?

Laws, social norms, and just plain common sense tell us not to lash out physically or verbally every time something irritates us. Otherwise, we could hurt ourselves and others.

### What are some ways to deal with anger?

Some people choose to ignore or bottle up anger, but this approach may actually cause more harm because the root problem is never addressed. Instead, try to manage anger so it can become a more positive emotion. Here are some ideas:

**Relax.** Breathe deeply from your diaphragm (your belly, not your chest) and slowly repeat a calming word or phrase like "take it easy." Think of relaxing experiences, such as sitting on a beach or walking through a forest.

**Think positively.** Remind yourself that the world is not out to get you, but rather you're just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life.

**Problem-solve.** Identify the specific problem that is causing the anger and approach it head-on—even if the problem does not have a quick solution.

Emotions such as stress, sadness or fear may cause someone to feel angry. Tell a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult if you feel:

- Irritable, grumpy, or in a bad mood more often than not
- Angry for days at a time
- Like you want to hurt yourself or someone else.

These feelings could be signs of depression.

Parenting Physically Aggressive Children and Youth  
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Handout 5: Anger Management Fact Sheet for Teens

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## Dealing With Anger

Have you ever lost your temper? Did you yell and scream or want to hit someone? Maybe your little brother got into your room and played with your toys without permission. Or maybe your teacher gave you too much homework. Or maybe a friend borrowed your favorite video game and then broke it. That made you angry!

Everyone gets angry. Maybe you "lose your cool" or "hit the roof." Anger can even be a good thing. When kids are treated unfairly, anger can help them stand up for themselves. The hard part is learning **what to do** with these strong feelings.

### What Is Anger?

You have lots of emotions. At different times, you may be happy, sad, or jealous. Anger is just another way we feel. It's perfectly OK to be angry at times — in fact, it's important to get angry sometimes. But anger must be released in the right way. Otherwise you'll be like a pot of boiling water with the lid left on. If the steam doesn't escape, the water will finally boil over and blow its top! When that happens to you, it's no fun for anyone.

### What Makes You Angry?

Many things may make kids angry. You may get angry when something doesn't go your way. Maybe you get mad at yourself when you don't understand your homework or when your team loses an important game. When you have a hard time reaching a goal you might become frustrated. That frustration can lead to anger.

Kids who tease you or call you names can make you angry. Or you might get angry with your parents if you think one of their rules is unfair. Worst of all is when you are blamed for something you didn't do. But it's also possible to get angry and not even know why.

### How Can I Tell When I'm Angry?

There are different ways people feel anger. Usually your body will tell you when you are angry. Are you breathing faster? Is your face bright red? Are your muscles tense and your fists clenched tight? Do you want to break something or hit someone? Anger can make you yell or scream at those around you, even people you like or love.

Some people keep their anger buried deep inside. If you do this, you might get a headache or your stomach might start to hurt. You may just feel crummy about yourself or start to cry. It's not good to hide your anger, so you should find a way to let it out without hurting yourself or others.

### How Can I Tell When Someone Else Is Angry?

When someone you know is angry, he or she may stomp away or stop talking to you. He or she may become quiet and withdrawn. Some people scream and try to hit or harm anyone close by. If a person is this angry, you should get away as soon as possible.

Once you are away from the angry person, stop and think. Try to figure out what made that person so angry. Can you make the situation better? How does the other person feel? When the other



This is a brief overview of anger and its consequences, as well as some “use it now” techniques to help children manage anger. But when the anger becomes unmanageable, we can see kids get aggressive. Let’s explore that.

According to Dr. Ross Greene, who has done extensive work in treating angry, explosive, non-compliant children, a competent and comprehensive evaluation can be critical in understanding why children become aggressive, and what their triggers are. For many children, depression is manifested as irritability and grumpiness. These children may benefit from the use of pharmacological therapy to help with some of their depression and irritability, which may in turn reduce the frequency and intensity of some of their violent outbursts.

[Source: Ross W. Greene, PhD., “Why Your Child Isn’t Doing What He or She is Told and What You Can Do About It,” talk delivered during “The Explosive and Noncompliant Child: A Special Workshop for Parents,” Health Talks at the Cleveland Clinic, December 6, 2001, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Senay Publishing, Cleveland, Ohio (VHS).]

## Unit

# 3

## Managing Physically Aggressive Behaviors

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So, what can you do about angry, aggressive behaviors? How can you respond?

The first and most important thing you can do is to have a plan. Have a plan to ACT, not REACT. If you have an action plan, the situation will resolve more easily than it would if you react - often in an unplanned, highly charged emotional state - not your best time for thinking clearly.

A quote from Dr. Haim Ginott (renown psychologist, author of “Between Parent and Child”)

*“I’ve come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. My personal approach creates the climate. My daily mood makes the weather. As a teacher I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.”*

This quote is very true regarding our response to a child’s behavior. This speaks to the important role adults have in shaping children’s lives.

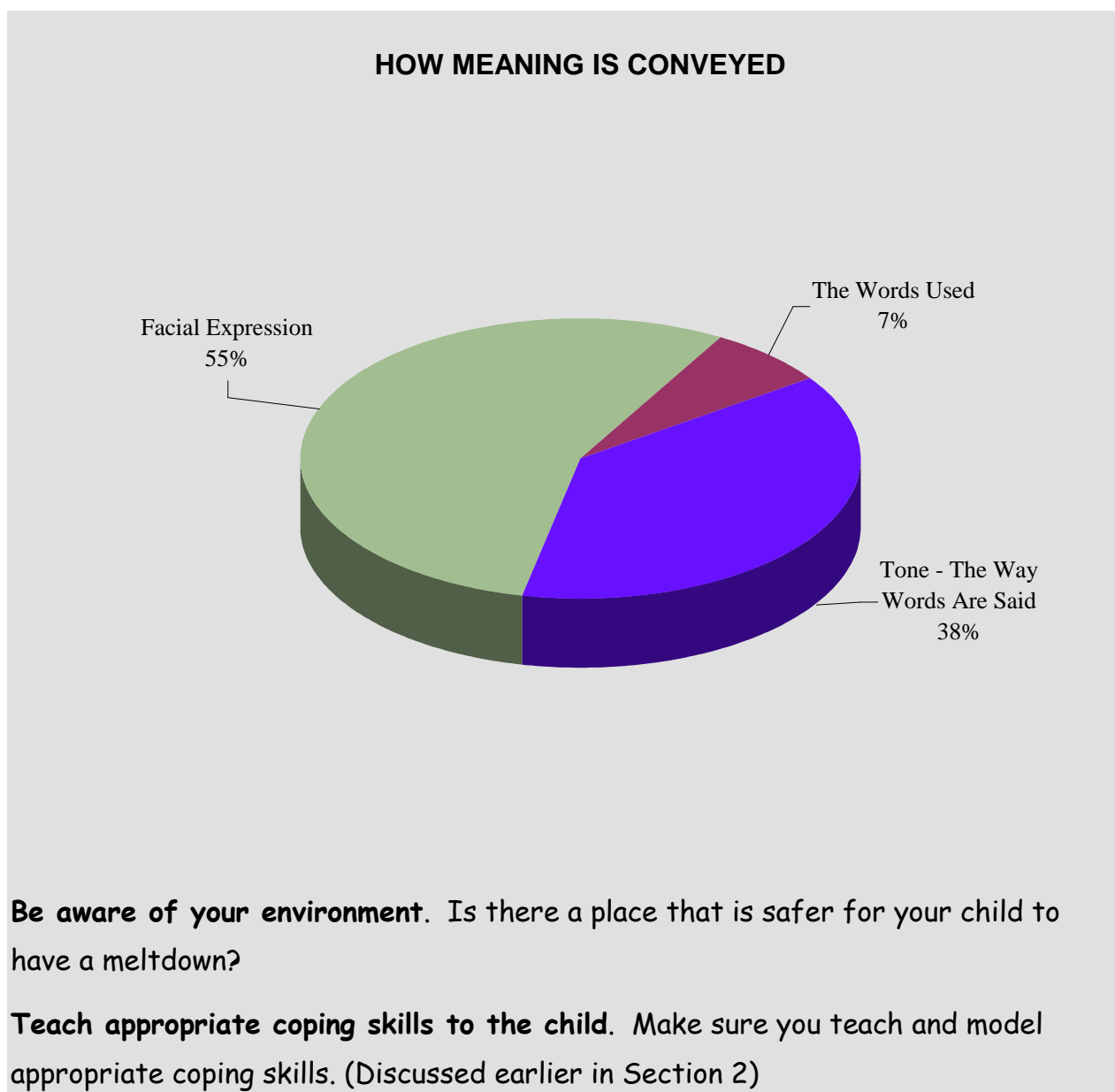
We can *never* condone, make excuses, or ignore a child’s aggression and violence. However, we choose how we respond. We can respond without losing our self-respect and without being disrespectful to the child. Remember, *our* response to the child in crisis is critical to maintaining control of the situation, for everyone.

## The Attitude of a Parent

- Assume compliance. Show this in your words and your body language – your non-verbal communication.
- Be consistent and impartial. Favoring a child who is not explosive provides many opportunities for children to be manipulative. Consistency, impartiality, and providing appropriate boundaries and expectations works for all children. Remember, it is not the severity of a consequence to behavior that changes behavior, but the CERTAINTY of a consequence. If children know that their behavior will result in a specific consequence (good or bad) consistently, then they are more likely to have behaviors that get them the response they want (if they are capable of acting in that way).
- Offer choices. Be willing to negotiate. Teaching children affords them the opportunity to learn from their own actions. Offering children choices (that you can live with regardless of what they choose) helps children to grow, learn, and feel empowered.
- Immediacy is Paramount. When a child is showing some of the signs of agitation that we discussed earlier, you need to intervene as soon as possible. Children may be soothed and de-escalated if we observe them in the early stages of agitation.
- Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication. If we look for the meaning behind a behavior, we often find the child is trying to meet a need.
- Deciphering what need they are trying to meet can help us provide what they need *before the situation becomes out of control*. While you cannot successfully reason with a child while the child (and/or you) is escalated, the child is witnessing your response to the situation.
- Avoid power plays and personalizing the situation. It can't be about you, or them, or who is in charge. Stick to the reason for the difference of opinion – the aggression, the violence, the inappropriate behavior. It is easy to be sidetracked, to want to show the child “who’s boss,” but in doing so you lose that consistency, and the opportunity for teaching.

Your *response* teaches children more than any words you say to them. Extensive research conducted by Dr. Albert Mehrabian, Ph.D shows that:

- 7% of meaning is in the words that are spoken.
- 38% of meaning is paralinguistic (this is tone, the way that the words are said).
- 55% of meaning is in facial expression.



## Teaching Coping Skills

Children often can use or ‘default’ to using only two or three coping skills; they will need to have the opportunity to learn and practice new coping skills over time. Talking with the child and posting a list of the child’s coping skills where the child can see them, using words or pictures (depending on the child’s age and developmental level), may be a helpful prompt when the child starts to escalate.

Two approaches to dealing with aggression in children and youth. Each is based on discipline tenets - teaching, modeling respectful behavior, preventing explosions, and finding new ways for flexibility and frustration tolerance.

## Establishing Structure, Expectations, and Practice Opportunities

One of the most basic tools that helps in reducing youth aggression and violence is to have clear structure and expectations. These, when coupled with teaching and practice opportunities for children to learn new and better skills, are the foundation of a number of successful children’s programs, including Boys Town. *Many of the approaches used in the Boys Town model are not workable for individual family foster homes because of staffing and other logistical issues. However, some components of the Boys Town model are helpful for foster parents to build their own set of structure and expectations.*

The Boys Town philosophy assumes that some youth **have not yet learned** the necessary skills to live happy, healthy, productive lives. The approach focuses on teaching essential life skills (social, academic, self-care and vocational skills) in an active style with repeated practice, rehearsal and reinforcement. Boys Town uses a reward/consequence approach within a structured set of expectations, supervision, and schedules. It is key that a youth understands what is expected of him or her. *Clear communication of expectations* is critical to the success of this program. The strategies offered through the Boys Town approach will help in

understanding and effectively dealing with low intensity aggressive behaviors, such as non-compliance, teasing, and whining before they escalate into high intensity aggressive behaviors, such as hitting, stabbing, and shooting. For many youth in care, just knowing the expectations is not enough. They may lack basic foundational skills. That lack of skills can mean that they are not able to comply with expectations, even if they want to. So in addition to communicating expectations, parents need to be aware of the skills (and lack of skills) that they may find in their foster children.

Boys Town offers a list of the most common skills that youth are lacking that result in explosive behaviors.

#### Common Skills Youth are Lacking

1. Asking for help.
2. Accepting criticism or a consequence.
3. Following instructions.
4. Correcting another person.
5. Accepting no for an answer.
6. Making a request.
7. Problem-solving a disagreement.
8. Reporting whereabouts and activities.
9. Resisting peer pressure.
10. Assertiveness.

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, Appendix B, Social Skills Curriculum, p. 95]

Parents need to know what the positive reinforcers are for the children in their care in order to provide effective praise, support, and reward for appropriate behavior and achievement of skills. Similarly, in any reward/consequence program, foster

parents also need to know what techniques are likely to be deterrents and to help a child internalize why they may not want to pursue a specific behavior in the future.

## Positive Reinforcements

- **Social**: Praising, smiling, head-nodding, attention, touching, hugging, listening, spending time together, etc.
- **Consumable**: Snacks, candy, juice, dining out, special meals, etc.,
- **Activity**: Watching TV, reading books, hobbies, movies, sports, having friends over, telephone time, etc.
- **Manipulative**: Toys, blocks, puzzles, games, models, painting kits, etc.
- **Exchangeable**: Stickers, stars, points, money or other objects which can be exchanged for other reinforcers.

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, p. 23, Figure 1]

*Remember:* What is a positive reinforcer for one person may not be a positive reinforcer for another person.

One way of determining what could be a positive reinforcer for a youth is to undertake a ‘Reward Survey.’ This may help a youth be more motivated to use a desirable behavior.

This can help to determine individual positive reinforcers for a youth. Do you know what could motivate the youth in your care, or could you see yourself having a conversation to learn what rewards could encourage the youth?

### Reward Survey

1. People: Who does the youth like to spend time with?
2. What everyday activities does the youth like to do?

3. What special activities does the youth enjoy? (Going to movies, baking cookies, etc.)
4. What are the youth's favorite foods and beverages?
5. What specific types of verbal and physical attention does the youth like? (Praise, compliments, pats on the back, etc.)
6. What kind of exchange rewards does the youth like to receive? (Stickers, money?)
7. Other rewards - anything else the youth likes, is interested in, spends a lot of time doing, or would like to spend more time doing.

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, Appendix B, p. 23, Figure 2]

Parents and caregivers may use withholding or removal of certain privileges as a consequence for aggressive behavior.

[Examples - television usage; computer time; transportation such as car use, driving lessons, rides to/from places; bicycles; skateboards; visits with friends; Ipods/Video games/other electronic devices; staying up late].

For some children, being physically removed from a situation is important to help them regain control of their emotions or to keep everyone safe. While a “time-out” or “time-in” is one option, this option is limited and must be used in compliance with the child’s supervision and safety plan. It may be that the foster parent needs to stay with the child but remove the child from the situation or circumstance. Pre-planning to ensure that other children are appropriately supervised is essential if this technique is to be employed.

Other consequences that can be helpful in deterring aggressive behavior include imposing timed consequences that are directly related to the child’s behavior. For example:



3. If a child breaks the dryer, the foster parent or care provider will need to spend time and money to get the dryer repaired. The foster parent can then tie a consequence back to that specific behavior by saying, “I spent one hour making the phone calls, waiting for the repair person, and getting the dryer repaired. Since you caused me to lose an hour during which I could have been doing my chores and responsibilities, in order to repay me, I would like you to fold this load of laundry out of the dryer.” In this way, the child is learning the concept of restitution and the consequences of a specific behavior are tied directly to the child’s behavior.
4. For older children, the amount of time might be specified – i.e., it cost me an hour of my time and we couldn’t do laundry for two days while we were waiting for the dryer to be repaired. I would like you to spend an hour of your time helping me fold laundry as I catch up on the laundry that we couldn’t do while the dryer was broken. This might mean that the child will ultimately fold 3 or 4 loads of laundry, totaling an hour’s time, spread over a day or two (15 or 20 minutes to fold one load). Any consequences need to be brief, time-limited, and directly tied to the child’s behavior, whenever possible.
5. Letting a child know that your time is valuable and helping them understand what your time means is an important step in the child understanding the impact of his or her behavior on others. For example, a foster parent might say, ‘it took 25 minutes of my time to help you deal with that issue. I would like you to please help me regain some of that time by helping me do something I had planned to do in that time (like prepare dinner, set the table, etc.).
6. Notice that the child is being asked to help the foster parent regain some time, but is not being asked to just take on additional chores. Imposing additional chores NOT related to the child’s behavior can be punitive and not conducive to learning for the child. In addition, they can trigger a complaint against the foster parent. As with any behavior plan, be sure to

talk with your child's caseworker to discuss what approach is most appropriate with that particular child.

This approach begins to help children understand that they are part of a larger system, that they impact others, and can lay the foundation to help a child develop empathy.

Another approach that might be used to help a child develop empathy are the use of "I" statements. This reflects back to a child how you are feeling as a result of the child's behaviors or actions.

### **Constructing I-Statements**

Good communication is an essential to the health of any relationship. And I-Statements are an effective form of communication because they maintain a respectful attitude toward the receiver and also place the responsibility for change in that person. Constructed properly, they also avoid the destructive "put-downs" inherent in blaming, criticizing, judging, shaming, ridiculing and name-calling. In reality, I-Statements can take many forms. And as you become more skilled in constructing them, you will most likely find yourself coming up with many variations. However, when you first begin working with them, it is helpful to have an initial template to use in constructing them. The following is such template. It has four parts, stated in the following order:

1. "I"
2. what YOU feel or want
3. the event that evoked your feeling(s) or desire (typically something you BOTH can agree on), and
4. the effect the event has on YOU.

Combine these pieces to form a sentence as follows: “I feel \_\_\_\_\_#2\_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_#3\_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_#4\_\_\_\_\_.”

**Example:** “I feel (2) very scared (3) when you are late home from work, because (4) I worry that something might have happened to you.”

### **Common Errors in Constructing I-messages:**

#### **Avoid Inserting “that” or “like”**

The phrases “I feel that....”-or “I feel like....” are really expressions of thought, often an opinion or judgment. The use of “I feel” should always be followed by a feeling such as “sad,” “glad,” or “afraid.”

#### **Avoid Disguised YOU-Statements**

These include sentences that begin with “I feel that you....” or “I feel like you....” Again, they immediately put the listener into a one-down position.

#### **Avoid Accentuating Your Negative Feelings**

Some people spend a lot of time focusing on communicating their negative feelings and forget to communicate their positive feelings. Expressing your joy, happiness, relief, etc. when your partner has done something that elicits these feelings in you is equally important.

#### **Avoid Undershooting the Intensity of Your Feelings**

When individuals first start working with I-Statements, it is common for them to at first send a message that minimizes the intensity of their feelings and consequently their attempt to communicate has less impact on the receiver. Remember: It is very important to match the message you send to your level of feeling.

#### **And Finally, Some Thoughts about Using I-Statements to Express Anger**

When I work with couples who are highly reactive and just beginning to learn more effective communication styles, I often will recommend that they NOT use I-

Statements to express anger. This is because it often takes several week of practice before individuals become skilled at I-Statement construction AND listening to anger without taking offense and reacting. During these weeks, statements starting with “I’m angry...” can put one’s partner into an immediate defensive (and sometimes reactive) stance, making it easier to slip back into old patterns of relating that are shaming or hurtful. It is also very easy to end up with a “YOU-Statement” when attempting to express anger.

It is much easier to hear the primary feelings (of hurt or fear) expressed than it is to hear the secondary feeling of anger. (For an explanation of primary and secondary feelings, review “What is Anger?” and “Time-Outs” on the RagePage.)

For example: Take a partner or spouse who has prepared a special anniversary meal and has been sitting home waiting for their significant other (who is two hours late and hasn’t called) to return. It may be very tempting to greet that individual with some form of “I’m angry at you now because you didn’t call me and now dinner is ruined.”

Consider this alternative which expresses the primary feeling of fear: “Honey, I was really scared when you were late and didn’t call because I feared that you’d been in an accident.” Hear the expression of love and concern here?

And in another situation where the primary feeling is disappointment: “Honey, I’m feeling really disappointed right now because when you didn’t call to let me know that you were going to be late -- that set my timing off on cooking this special meal for us. I’m really disappointed because I wanted this evening to be special for us.” Hear the love here?

Now, if you were the person arriving home late and you hadn't called, which of these examples would you find easier to hear?

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Some children may not respond to “I” statements. That is, they simply may not care about how their behavior affects others (or they are not willing or able to show that they care). In those instances, parents should still use “I” statements to connect the behaviors, feelings, and relationships. However, a recognition must be made that some children will require more time and perhaps more intense consequences before they understand the ramifications of aggressive behavior.

When a parent is talking with a child about their aggressive behavior, some basic rules should be followed at all times: (From Stan Davis, StopBullyingNow.com)

1. Full accountability rests with the child. No matter what provocation existed, the child made a choice to hurt someone else.
2. Allow the child’s anxiety to become conscience. Don’t take sadness or guilt away. Don’t allow early apologies. Remorse can be a powerful internalized lesson.
3. Expect and insist on honesty about what the young person did.
4. Enforce **previously-known** consequences. Preplanning is important. Youth should be well aware ahead of time about the consequences of their aggressive behavior. (For example, if you hit your brother, you will lose your gameboy for the day.) Enforce natural and logical consequences. “When you hit Billy, you hurt him and made him sad. He does not want a person that hurts him or hits him to come to his house to play. So you won’t be able to play at Billy’s house right now, even though you had a play date planned today.”
5. Maintain a positive-feeling tone and loving attention. It is easy to let ourselves become angry and emotional. Being matter-of-fact about the consequence, and separating our feelings about the behavior from our feelings about the child, is important. “I love you, but I don’t like your behavior when you throw toys across the room.”
6. Praise and positively reinforce positive behavior. “I noticed that you seemed really mad today when you tripped on the steps. I was really proud that you did not hit or hurt anyone or anything. Instead, I noticed that you took your mad

feelings and acted them out by stomping your feet up and down five times. That was a really good thing to do. Did it help you to feel better?” Note that we will be discussing some specific ways to praise a child in a little bit.

7. Encourage children and youth to identify the goals they were trying to reach with their aggressive behavior and help them find other ways to reach those goals.
  - What did you do?
  - What was wrong with that?
  - What problem were you trying to solve? What goal are you trying to reach?
  - Next time you have that problem or goal, how will you solve it or reach it without hurting others?

For example:

Parent: What did you do?

Child: I pushed Mike.

Parent: What was wrong with pushing Mike?

Child: He fell down and got hurt and got mad and cried.

Parent: What were you trying to do when you pushed Mike?

Child: I was trying to get to the monkey bars and Mike was in my way!

Parent: So you were trying to reach the monkey bars? And Mike was in the way?

Child: Yes, he shouldn't have been blocking the pathway.

Parent: But sometimes other children, especially young children like Mike, violate others' personal space or block our way accidentally. We can't push them out of the way. We know that hurting other people is not OK. So what could you have done differently? What will you do the next time you are

trying to go to the monkey bars and Michael or some other child (or adult) is blocking your way?

Child: Well, I could go around them. I could also take a different route to the monkey bars. Would that help?

Parent: Yes, absolutely. You might also say, “excuse me,” and the person might move out of the way on the path. Any of those ideas would work. And no one would get hurt as a result.

Understanding when and how aggressive behavior might occur:

In a system based on reward and consequence, on natural and logical consequences whenever possible, parents and caregivers must understand why and how children are likely to become aggressive or noncompliant. Documenting antecedents to aggressive behavior may be helpful for caregivers in predicting what might trigger an aggressive episode in a child.

## **What are the triggers to the aggressive behavior?**

A trigger (or antecedent) event is a stimulus which indicates to a person that a certain behavior will either result in a favorable outcome or an unfavorable consequence. Antecedent events take place before behaviors. [Traffic lights are antecedents which signal particular driving behaviors - green lights signal driver can proceed; red lights signals driver to stop.]

To use a behavioral example from the Boys Town sourcebook, a parent asks a child to clean his room, but the child is able to avoid the task by whining. The parent’s request becomes the trigger event which signals to the child that whining will result in avoidance of the task. (This presupposes that cleaning one’s room is an unpleasant task that the child wants to avoid.) The parent’s request only becomes the trigger for whining if the parent discontinues the request when the child begins to whine.

Boys Town process notes that outcomes that are either reinforcing or punishing that make up the contingencies that control aggressive behavior are most often the behavior of those individuals who interact with the aggressive child. In other words, **you as the parent/caregiver set the framework both before and after the aggressive episode**. Knowing what the triggers are for children and anticipating what can set off a violent or aggressive episode can help the parent or caregiver prevent the episode from ever occurring.

### **Structuring Your Home For Safety**

To structure a home for safety, parents/caregivers need to be very clear in their expectations and tolerance. High expectations and low tolerance for aggression and violence go hand in hand. Aggressive youth are really good at raising the tolerance level of adults. Patience, encouragement, and recognition need to be combined with a low tolerance for aggression and violence to support youth as they are struggling to learn new skills. Clear expectations, clearly communicated, with known rewards and consequences, are essential for all members of a family so that everyone can feel safe.

### **Praise – Make It Effective**

Parents must recognize and praise the youth for any positive behavior changes or efforts to manage new skills. Caregivers and parents need to ensure that their praise is effective – that it helps the youth understand the value of their choices, that they understand what they are being praised for, and that they enjoy a positive consequence or reward for making good choices. Praise can also build the relationship between the parent and the child as it fosters mutual respect and helps the child build their self-esteem. Boys Town offers a specific process for praising youth, which parents may find helpful as they build their own skills in this area:

1. Praise
2. Description of appropriate behavior – be specific about what they are being praised for



3. Rationale – why the behavior is good for the youth
4. Request for acknowledgement – making sure the youth understands
5. Positive consequence/reinforcement – additional privileges, free time, etc.

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, p. 48, Figure 4]

What are some benefits of effective praise?

- Powerful teaching tool.
- Increases likelihood of appropriate behavior in the future.
- Occurrence of inappropriate behavior decreases.
- Helps youth to build positive relationships.
- Enhances youth's self-concept.

Effective Teaching:

How do we help youth acquire new skills? We are responsible for teaching youth the skills that they are lacking. And since many of us are not born teachers, we may need some support as we develop our own skill set in this area. Lessons can be taken from the Boys Town approach.

Boys Town uses two approaches to teaching interaction, which is a process for dealing with a youth's problem behaviors and teaching more appropriate alternatives. One is used immediately following a display of inappropriate behavior. The other is more proactive, providing additional opportunities for practice when the youth is calm and not agitated.

## Steps to Teaching Interaction

### Steps to Teaching Interaction

1. Initial Praise, Empathy or Affection
2. Description/Demonstration of Inappropriate Behavior
3. Consequences - Negative consequences and a positive correction statement
4. Description/Demonstration of Positive Behavior
5. Rationale
6. Request for Acknowledgement
7. Practice
8. Feedback - Praise, specific description or demonstration, positive consequences
9. General Praise

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, p. 53]

## Other Steps to Teaching Interaction

### 1. Initial Praise, Empathy or Affection

"Thanks for looking at me while we're talking." "I know how much you were looking forward to the concert"

### 2. Description/Demonstration of Inappropriate Behavior

"When I said 'No,' you looked away and began to curse at me and argue about why you have the right to go to the concert."

### 3. Consequences - Negative consequences and a positive correction statement

"For not accepting 'No,' you've lost your computer privileges for the next 30 minutes."

### 4. Description/Demonstration of Positive Behavior

"Whenever someone has to tell you 'No,' whether it's a teacher, your parents, or me, here's what you need to do. You should look at the person, and

acknowledge that you heard them by saying something like, 'Sure, I understand.' If you don't understand, calmly ask for a reason. And finally, do not argue about the decision."

**5. Rationale**

"You'll be more likely to be able to do on more activities because people will see you as more responsible."

**6. Request for Acknowledgement**

"Do you understand?"

**7. Practice**

"Okay, Bill, now we're going to practice how to accept 'No.' I want you to ask me again if you can go to the concert. I am still going to say 'No,' but this time you need to look at me and say 'Okay' without cursing or arguing."

**8. Feedback - (Praise, specific description or demonstration, positive consequences)**

"Great! You looked at me and said 'Okay.' That is the way to accept 'No.' You've earned back 15 minutes of your computer time."

**9. General Praise**

"Nice job! Keep trying, I know you'll do well."

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, p. 59, Figure 2]

Remember that this is only one tool and the actual interaction will need to be carefully tailored to each child's age, developmental level, cognitive ability, and their safety and supervision plan. One size does NOT fit all. Rather, several examples are provided as a tool for parents and caregivers to use as they development their own strategies and home structures to fit their unique situations and the individual needs of the children in their homes. Research conducted by Willner et al (1975), with children and youth, suggests there are behaviors that adults demonstrate that they like and don't like. Here is that list.

## Caregiver Behavior Research

LIKED BEHAVIOR	DISLIKED BEHAVIOR
Calm, pleasant voice tone	Describing only what the youth did wrong
Offering or providing help	Anger
Joking	Negative feedback
Positive Feedback	Profanity
Fairness	Lack of Understanding
Explanation of how or what to do	Unfriendly
Explanation of why (giving reasons)	Unpleasant
Concern	Bossy, demanding
Enthusiasm	Unfair consequences
Politeness	Bat attitude
Getting right to the point	Unpleasant physical contact
Smiling	Mean, insulting remarks
	No opportunity to speak
	Shouting
	Accusing, blaming statements
	Throwing objects

[Source: Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook for Child Care Providers, Published by The Boys Town Press, Copyright 1989, p. 46]

When you think about who you like to spend time with, and/or with whom you have a strong, positive relationship, what youth tell us makes a lot of sense. Teaching youth skills to gain control of their actions and to make different choices about how to manage their frustrations and emotions will be most effective when these key elements of a strong relationship are present.

One approach you may find useful in structuring your home involves clear rewards and consequences for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, as well as structured opportunities for teaching children and youth skills that they may be lacking. This framework is most effective with high expectations for compliance, and a low tolerance level for aggressive behavior. Learning the skills you need to train youth, and to respond to aggressive behavior calmly and consistently, will set the stage for future success.

## Pathways Inventory

Pathways Inventory (and triggers list). This is a tool to help explore the issues children bring to our interactions with them. This will help us to answer the question, “What pathways/ skill deficits are involved for this child.

### Pathways Inventory

(Rev. 11/14/05)

#### Executive skills

	Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mindset or task to another, adapting to new circumstances or rules
	Poor sense of time/difficulty doing things in a logical or prescribed order
	Disorganized/difficulty staying on topic, sorting through thoughts, or keeping track of things
	Difficulty considering the likely outcomes or consequences of actions (impulsive)
	Difficulty considering a range of solutions to a problem

#### Language processing skills

	Often has difficulty expressing thoughts, needs, or concerns in words
	Often appears not to have understood what was said
	Long delays before responding to questions
	Difficulty knowing or saying how he/she feels

#### Emotion regulation skills

	Difficulty staying calm enough to think rationally (when frustrated)
	Cranky, grouchy, grumpy, irritable (outside the context of frustration)
	Sad, fatigued, tired, low energy
	Anxious, nervous, worried, fearful
	Inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., “It’s not fair,” “I’m stupid,” “Things will never work out for me”)

### Cognitive flexibility skills

	Concrete, black-and-white, thinker; often takes things literally
	Insistence on sticking with rules, routine, original plan
	Does poorly in circumstances of unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty
	Difficulty shifting from original idea or solution; possibly perseverative or obsessive
	Difficulty appreciating another person's perspective or point-of-view
	Doesn't take into account situational factors that would suggest the need to adjust a plan of action

### Social skills

	Difficulty attending to or misreading of social cues/poor perception of social nuances/difficulty recognizing nonverbal social cues
	Inaccurate interpretations/cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., "Everyone's out to get me," "Nobody likes me," "You always blame me")
	Lacks basic social skills (how to start a conversation, how to enter a group, how to connect with people)
	Seeks the attention of others in inappropriate ways; seems to lack the skills to seek attention in an adaptive fashion
	Seems unaware of how behavior is affecting other people; is surprised by others' responses to his/her behavior
	Lacks empathy; appears not to care about how behavior is affecting others or their reactions
	Poor sense of how s/he is coming across or being perceived by others
	Inaccurate self-perception

### Triggers (list)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Why do we focus on the pathways/skill deficits? Focusing on the pathways/skill deficits helps adults:

- Understand that a child's explosive outbursts are not intentional, goal-oriented, manipulative, or attention-seeking
- Identify the specific cognitive skills that need to be trained
- Many adults may have triggers for their own anger that they have not really identified (those buttons that kids find so easily). Therefore, it may be very useful for adults to complete a Pathways Inventory for themselves. When we know and understand our own personal triggers, we will be better able to control our emotional responses and build our own skills as we help children build their skills.

## Adults Can (and Should) Have Expectations

*Examples of expectations:*

- *Children will comply with adult expectations around chores, homework, and personal hygiene.*
- *Children will follow household rules.*
- *Children will not harm themselves or others.*
- *Children will treat others with respect in language and actions.*

## Vignettes

**Vignette A-** A five-year-old boy comes home from day care and is very agitated, lashing out and hitting his mother when she asks him to put his shoes in his room. His physical aggression continues, he is disruptive and yelling at everyone, name-

calling and throwing things, for no apparent reason, other than aggravation at the adult request/expectation. Two hours later, he has a very painful bowel movement.

What questions does this raise for you? What kind of detective work would you do?

Is this child able to understand the signals his body is sending him regarding his bowel movements? Are these signals triggering his violence? Does he receive occupational therapy? Can he have a gastroenterological examination? Would biofeedback help?

What could be some triggers?

Time of day, transitions, a particular individual at daycare, something that happened on the way home from daycare, something sensory, something medical

What pathways are involved?

Pathways - Emotion regulation; Executive skills

**Vignette B**- A ten-year-old boy is asked to put on his pajamas, part of his regular routine. He grabs his brand new pair of pajamas, blue with fire trucks on them. He turns to his foster mother and begins to yell and scream, throwing the pajamas to the floor, stomping on them, throwing objects, yelling, crying, hitting.

What questions does this raise for you? What kind of detective work would you do?

Is the explosive behavior triggered by the adult request/expectation, or is it something else? Is there something about the pajamas that pushed the boy's button? Do the images of fire trucks stir something? Are there sensory issues? Examine past to see if any history of trauma around fire trucks.

What could be some triggers?



Sensory issues: touch- have the pajamas yet been washed? Is there a triggering smell (detergent)? Some traumatic event related to fire/fire trucks? Transitions? Time of day?

What pathways are involved?

Pathways - Executive functioning; Emotional regulation

**Vignette C**- A fourteen-year-old girl is looking forward to a scheduled field trip at school. An unexpected snowstorm blows through and school is cancelled on the day of the field trip. When she sees the cancellation on TV, the girl throws her cereal bowl across the room, tosses her backpack outside in the snow, and kicks the dog (who quickly gets out of the way).

What could be some triggers?

The weather changed, school was cancelled.

What pathways are involved?

Pathways - Cognitive flexibility skills; executive skills.

**Ask:** How might the foster parent work with this young woman in the future to prevent an explosion, if something similar should occur?

This young woman has a hard time understanding that certain things are out of everyone's control.

Remind that trip is determined by the weather; have the young woman check the weather with the family the day before; help prepare for the possibility of a cancellation; check with the school ahead of time to see if there is going to be a rescheduled date for the field trip if there is a snow day.

**Vignette D**- Father reminds 15-year old foster son that it is time to take his shower as part of his night routine. The young man refuses to take a shower and then proceeds to throw his towel, soap-on-a-rope, and the shampoo on the bathroom

floor, yelling and screaming at his father. “It’s not fair. I’m grown up. I don’t need to shower.”

What are some possible triggers?

Sensory issues - the feel of the shower water on his skin; the darkness behind the shower curtain; the smell of the soap or shampoo; Fear that someone will come in when he’s showering; bad body odor is a protection against being abused; can’t organize what he needs to take a shower; needs more time to transition from what he was doing to taking a shower.

What pathways are involved?

Pathways - Cognitive flexibility; executive skills; emotion regulation

What can the foster parents do?

Research child’s history to see if there are known issues around bathing and hygiene. Find out how previous foster family handled bathing. Help to prepare the child for the night routine – remind him of his routine, give him 5 or 10 minute warnings prior to the time to shower, help him organize what he will need to take a shower, make sure he has appropriate toiletries, ask him about whether he likes the soap or the shampoo or prefers a different brand, change the shower curtain to one that is clear instead of one that is opaque, consider whether he would do better showering in the morning rather than at night.

## Connecting the Approaches

### Restitution

We have discussed several forms of positive discipline and consequences. An important component of any behavior management model for children who are aggressive is the concept of *restitution*. Restitution is an act of repairing any damage caused by an individual’s actions. Restitution is made to the “victim”, to

society, and to one's self. Restitution results in learning and increased self-esteem. On the other hand, punishment results in fear and diminished self-esteem.

Using restitution teaches children that if they hurt someone, they need to make it right. As the parent, you can help children develop an understanding of **cause and effect** and how their behaviors impact all of the people involved. Above all, restitution is about preserving relationships. Children who are aggressive, who lack basic social skills, often have precious few positive relationships and friendships. Helping them to understand their role in those relationships, as well as their responsibilities, is vital to helping those relationships continue and grow.

## **Crisis Intervention/Management**

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

A little precaution before a crisis occurs is preferable to a lot of fixing up afterward.

“A stitch in time saves nine.”

A little preventive maintenance can eliminate the need for major repairs later.

When you are parenting a youth who exhibits angry, aggressive, explosive behavior, enough cannot be said about the importance of prevention and planning ahead.

The best crisis planning takes place early in a case, considers the past and present experiences of the child, and includes input from the youth, the caseworker (legal guardian) and any others who witness and/or manage your child when s/he is agitated, escalating or in crisis. All caregivers should be prepared to handle the situation in the agreed upon way so that the child can experience consistency. A team meeting, including the family (birth, foster), therapist, teachers and any formal and informal resources, is an ideal place to develop a comprehensive Crisis Plan.

It is very important that your child's caseworker (legal guardian) is aware of, and in agreement with, the Crisis Plan that you develop for your foster child. Ask your child's worker if they prefer a specific process or format for developing a Crisis Plan. If an aggressive, explosive child has received services in the community, a crisis/emergency plan may already be part of a treatment file.

[Source: The following content is adapted from information on the following website:  
[http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/rts/Downloads/wStart/Crisis\\_Intervention\\_Plan.pps](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/rts/Downloads/wStart/Crisis_Intervention_Plan.pps)]

At a Team meeting, together, gather information:

- Examine the youth's history. (The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.)
  - Why does the youth engage in aggressive/explosive behavior?
    - Antecedents- what is the trigger/button- what sets the youth off?
    - Consequences- what does the youth expect?
    - Function- why, for what purpose might the youth engage in the behavior?
  - What can be done to prevent the behavior through social or environmental changes?
  - What behaviors/skills can be offered as an alternative to the youth to serve the same function?
  - What strengths and natural supports can be identified, developed and used?
- Assess risks
- Explore and then identify resources

Keep in mind that an effective crisis plan:

- Is user-friendly
- Has clear directions
- Is individualized

- Is preventative
- Plans for real-life situations
- Is developed collaboratively
- Changes as the child/youth changes

Remember, the youth and family (foster, birth) are the experts!

The team may gather information from the youth that will help in developing the crisis plan:

- When I am feeling well, I am (describes self)
- When I begin to feel (angry, depressed, scared...), this feels/looks/sounds like (think of The Four Levels of Agitation...)
- When I am feeling (angry, depressed, scared...) I want (what I want) from other people (i.e. talking, hugs, space...)
- When I am feeling (angry, depressed, scared...) I do not want (what I do not want) from other people (i.e. talking, hugs, space...)
- When I am feeling (angry, depressed, scared...), I want to talk to (foster parent, teacher, social worker, coach...)
- I will recognize that I need to (lower my voice, take a break, be gentle to myself or others) when I see you (adult prompts, such as put your hand over your heart, when you touch your finger to your forehead...)

It may be helpful for the team to plan for potential difficulties the youth may encounter in various environments- home, school and community. The team, together with the youth, can identify strategies for de-escalation, and identify who may be able to assist the youth at a time of high agitation or crisis.

The following are some ideas for the development of a crisis plan:

Signs that my child is becoming escalated:

For example: red face, clenched fists, shallow breathing...

### Steps to de-escalate my child:

When the child is calm, ask him/her to participate in the development of a plan, as suggested earlier. Ask how to help the child relax, calm, regain control - and ask what s/he would like you to do to keep others safe when s/he is in crisis.

### Strategies/coping skills my child identified and agrees to use:

When the child is not in crisis, s/he should participate in the development of a plan. S/he can identify ...

### If my child continues to escalate I will:

Keeping yourself, the child, others, and pets safe is the priority. Sometimes the child will be successful in using their coping skills, and sometimes our intervention will help the child deescalate. There may be times when we need to move ourselves and others to a safe location, monitor the child from a distance, and call for help.

### Emergency Contacts – Who Can Help Me

- o DSHS emergency contacts
- o Crisis lines
- o 911
- o Other caregivers
- o Other community resources

There can be a signature line for the child, foster parents, caseworker (legal guardian) and others involved in the development or carrying out of the plan.

Following a crisis, when things are calm, you may wish to consider reviewing the Safer Way to Handle my Feelings.

## **A Safer Way to Handle My Feelings**

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**Date, time and location of incident:** *(This can help parents identify possible triggers)*

**What was I supposed to be doing?** *(Helps children identify the desired behavior)*

**What happened?** *(Children must hold themselves accountable for their behavior)*

**What was I feeling?** *(Often children need help with this because they do not know what they were feeling.... was it anger, frustration, sadness, embarrassment, etc.? Then, use of a feelings chart and reflective listening can help them learn to identify the connections between feelings and behaviors)*

**Why was I feeling this way?** *(Identifies triggers, points out the reality that we can control our response to situations)*

**How did my behavior affect the people who were with me?** *(This can be difficult for children. Ask, "How do you think that made me feel?" If they really don't understand they can ask the people who were present.)*

**How do I feel about how I affected those people?** *(Try to teach the concept of empathy)*

**What can I do to make it right?** *(Apologize, pay them back in some way for what I did)*

**What are some better ways I could have handled the situation?** *(Problem-solve if they need help)*

## What Other Resources Do You Have?

- Child's caseworker
- Therapist
- Teacher
- Doctor
- Psychiatrist
- Other Caregivers
- Child's Birth Family (If appropriate)

Keep important phone numbers nearby (police, suicide prevention, mental health crisis, emergency number for DSHS)

## What Should You Do If You Respond Inappropriately to Your Child's Behavior?

Are there times when what you *should have* done is different than what you actually did?

- Did you ever ground a child for the rest of his/her life?
- Did you ever get angry and yell at a child, or respond inappropriately?

Guess what? You're Human! These are tough kids and parenting them is hard!

What do you do when you goof up as a parent? You're the judge, but your kids are the jury, and they notice. So how do you fix it? What do you say and do?

- Apologize to the child/youth and admit I was wrong
- Let him/her know I will try to do better.
- Explain that I might have overreacted (Perhaps grounding them for life was a little harsh). Have a discussion about what an appropriate consequence should be.
- Perhaps suggest to your child that next time, you will take a time-out for yourself and discuss an issue that has made you angry when you are calmer.



## Unit

# 4

## Self Care

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Parents need to have a plan for self-care. If you don't take of yourself, you won't have much left to care for your child. Think of a time when you were traveling on a plane. The flight attendant described the plane and the emergency procedures. She advised you to put an oxygen mask on yourself, first, before you attend to the needs of anyone else. If you aren't breathing, you won't be much good to your child.

When you think about what it takes to parent children and youth who are angry, aggressive and explosive, what do you need to take care of yourself – to rejuvenate your mind, body and spirit?

Kept in touch with supportive friends, or lost touch in the frantic day-to-day activities of running a home?

Get out of bed in the morning for a brisk walk, or given in to 20 more minutes of fitful sleep?

Have a place to connect with other parents of children who are aggressive and explosive, or do they think no one else walks in their shoes?

Kept a sense of humor?

Forgiving when things don't always go as planned?

The survey is a tool to focus back on yourself as the key to maintaining youth while in crisis.

## Self-Care Survey for Parents of Aggressive Children and Youth

Caregivers of aggressive children and youth face tremendous rewards and challenges. Respond **yes** or **no** to each of the following statements to see how well you're coping with being a caregiver.

1. I am getting enough restful sleep most nights.

Yes       No

2. I eat a well-balanced diet. And forgive myself the occasional chocolate lapse.

Yes       No

3. Exercise is part of my regular routine.

Yes       No

4. I have a period of relaxation built into each day.

Yes       No

5. I attend to my medical, dental and mental health care appointments and follow professional recommendations.

Yes       No

6. I make contact with supportive friends on a weekly basis.

Yes       No

7. I take time to nurture my spirituality on a consistent basis through meditation, spiritual or religious connections.

Yes       No

8. I seek additional community resources to help me cope with the stress of parenting children with aggressive, explosive behaviors.
- Yes       No
9. I acknowledge and express my feelings appropriately in a forum of empathetic, understanding participants or peers.
- Yes       No
10. I strive to have a positive, realistic attitude and use humor as part of that realistic outlook.
- Yes       No
11. I pay attention to my personal appearance and self-care and can be flexible about certain issues when necessary.
- Yes       No
12. I still enjoy my sense of humor and laugh regularly, and seek out situations or activities not related to my children's issues and behaviors that are humorous and enjoyable.
- Yes       No
13. I enjoy fun, leisure or hobby activities at least once a week.
- Yes       No
14. My financial and legal matters are manageable.
- Yes       No
15. I give myself permission to be flexible and change plans if necessary to take better care of myself.
- Yes       No

[Adapted from ‘Caregiver's self-care survey,’ <https://www.healthforums.com>  
9/01/06]

Quote:

“I have become clear about at least one thing: self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

## **Closing: Evaluations, distribution of certificates**

Note that while we are providing participants with tools, they should familiarize themselves with them more fully so that they are better able to prevent crises and to respond when their child(ren) are angry, aggressive and explosive.