Discipline

Children need love, especially when they do not deserve it.
– Harold Hulbert
Don’t Use an Elephant Gun To Shoot a Mouse

By Walt Piszchala

I remember sitting in the office of my first supervisor as a young and inexperienced child care worker, in Warehouse Point, Conn., at the State Receiving Home. This is a facility run by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, the year was 1975. Silas W. Davis, a man I would come to view as both a mentor and a father figure was speaking to me about his personal philosophy of disciplining children for inappropriate behavior. The words he spoke to me seemed strange and it was a while before it registered with me. He said, “I want you to remember this, ‘Don’t use an elephant gun to shoot a mouse...’”

Fast forward several months later, I was experiencing my first baptism under fire with an angry and oppositional 15-year-old boy who was telling me, in plain English that would make any sailor or truck driver proud, what I could do with my rules. Enraged by this blatant lack of respect, both for myself and the rules of the cottage, I proceeded to operate on pure emotion and adrenaline and totally ignored what Davis had told me in his office. You see it is one thing to remain calm reviewing a programmatic rule and even possibly role playing a situation in training under controlled circumstances, but it is quite another experiencing it in real life. It didn’t just affect the young man in question and me; it was in front of 17 other children and several of my co-workers.

Being young and inexperienced, I did what every parent since the dawn of time has done when their child goes into a meltdown, and does something either at home, school, or church to embarrass both themselves as well as their family, I brought out my own personal elephant gun. Needless to say I turned a routine verbal intervention into an exasperating incident which damaged not only my relationship with this child, but everyone who was witness to it. I always want to remember my personal elephant gun story so I can help every person I train to never have to experience what I did.

I would like to share with the readers, one specific area of my own Verbal De-escalation Curriculum that I teach to foster and adoptive parents in local and national conferences. I offer a five-step approach to setting limits that can be adapted to any age, population or functioning group.

**Step One: Use Language That Calms**

Tell your child in language that I refer to as “affect neutral” what it is that you are asking, not telling, them to either start, or stop doing. An example of each would be:
A. Your child gets into a heated argument with a sibling and becomes increasingly aggressive with both body language and verbal threats. In this situation you are setting limits to have them “stop” engaging in an inappropriate behavior. It’s not the argument that is our issue; it is the aggressive body language as well as the threats. If you start trying to intervene and stop your child from typical age appropriate behaviors, or sibling rivalries, you will never get anything accomplished. In addition to my “elephant gun” metaphor I always stress that in order to act in the best interest of the out-of-control individual we need to clearly be in control of our own feelings and emotions first. Have you had a bad day at work? Are there existing marital or financial problems in your relationship? These personal issues can exacerbate the situation and cause you to bring out your own personal elephant gun to try to settle a situation.

B. The second example of asking them to, in this case, “start” doing something is at 7 p.m., dinner is finished, the table is cleared, and chores complete, it is now homework time. Tommy has seated himself in front of the TV and is about to play his favorite video game while everyone else has gone to their rooms and cracked open their books. In this situation, an example of bringing out your own elephant gun would be to go over to the TV, take the remote, and “click.” We all know it is not going to end there. A line in the sand has been drawn and someone is going to lose. And, the unfortunate reality is it is going to be you!

Step Two: Tell them why...
You must clearly and concisely inform the child why you are asking, not telling, him or her to do something. The reason “why” should always go back to the common theme of “because the rules of the house” say that from 7 to 9 p.m. it is homework time and nothing else. Do not let the situation become personal, keep the focus on them, not you.

Step Three: Review the consequences.
(This can be a deadly minefield for a parent to navigate through)
The classic elephant gun, “negative consequence,” is an empty threat. For instance, “if you don’t go to your room right now you are going to lose TV for one month!” Now you know full well there has never been a parent in the history of the world who could stick to their guns for an entire month of no TV. Isn’t the primary point of consequences – both positive and negative – to teach children a lesson? What lesson are you imparting to your child if you bring out the negative consequences first? They begin thinking back on all of the times that the adults in their lives have yelled, screamed, and used negative reinforcements to try to change their behavior. Always try to remember, “in order to change a child’s behavior you have to first fundamentally change the way they view their world.” What are we doing if all we engage in are threatening, negative consequences using our own elephant guns?

So what else can we rely on instead of negative consequences? How about starting your intervention with a positive consequence for complying with your request, not demand, first? Sometimes the positive consequence will be a tangible reward, however other times
the positive consequence may simply be not earning a negative consequence. Try it sometime; it may surprise you with its effect on your child.

Now, once you’ve gone over the positive consequences for complying you must then let them know what the negative consequences will be for failure to cooperate.

Step Four: Give them some time.
You have to give them a brief cooling off period, no more than a few minutes. Trying to coach an answer out of children after all of this is too overwhelming. They need a few minutes to process everything, to make the best possible choice for them as well as lose the least amount of face with their siblings.

Step Five: Be prepared to enforce.
You need to be ready to do what you said would happen, both positively as well as negatively. The two biggest mistakes you can make at this stage is to not follow through with the positive consequence you said would happen, and being a parent that says, “This is it! No more chances! You better not do that again!” If this is your personal elephant gun, then I say give them your car keys, your Visa or MasterCard with directions to the nearest shopping mall, because at this point they own you. You have lost your credibility with the child as well as the rest of his or her siblings.

You all have a profound impact on your children’s lives. You are welcoming children into your homes, who in many cases have been damaged beyond our own imaginations and we are charged with the task of nurturing them into healthy and productive citizens of our society.

Walt Piszchala worked for The Connecticut Department of Children and Families for 33 years, specializing in working with children in a variety of capacities, primarily in residential care. For 27 of those years Piszchala worked as a trainer in the field of Crisis Intervention and Health and Safety, teaching both verbal and physical intervention techniques and CPR, AED, First Aid, Blood Borne Pathogens. Piszchala retired from the Connecticut Juvenile Training School as a full-time training coordinator. His main focus had been in the development and implementation of a comprehensive behavior management and crisis intervention program. From 1997 to 2006 Piszchala was an adjunct staff trainer at the Department of Children and Families training academy. Since 2007, Piszchala has become a member of the training faculty for the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents. He offers courses in verbal de-escalation and works with oppositional and defiant children. For more information, visit www.piszchala-associates.com. This article originally appeared in Fostering Families Today.
The Value of Consistency
By Jo Ann Wentzel

If I could give only one word of advice to parents, it would be consistency. A consistent parent gives the child the gift of always knowing what to expect. Neither the rules nor the consequences change from day to day.

I had foster kids who called this “nagging,” but they knew what they could or could not do and what would happen if they made the wrong choice. They would come in the door and before discovering we already knew what they had been up to, they were discussing the consequences. They knew them in advance. I knew I had hit home with a message when the kids started to finish the sentence. No kid, upon learning that he or she was in trouble, could claim ignorance because I had heard them repeat the rule.

They claim the average attention span for teens being talked to is about 30 seconds, so that is the time you have to get messages across. If that is the case, a complete message needs to be broken down into small, short bits, and repeated often.

Teens dislike sermons so these short bursts are best, but more important than length is content. Being consistent means telling the exact same thing in the exact same way until it sticks in their memories like an advertising jingle for a product on TV. You begin to remember the exact words; the phrase goes together without even thinking about it. Have you noticed the new trend in advertisements? The first few weeks you get the complete ad with every gruesome detail. Later on, they shorten it to just the punch line, but the entire ad is already playing in your mind. Commercials have something to teach parents!

Consistency means nothing to kids if you don’t follow through in practice. This means a parent should be sure of what policies they want to implement. Consistency implies no change without a good reason.

I have been a foster parent in organizations where every day there were policy changes. As foster parents, we were confused. Now, consider a foster child who has never had stability. Suddenly, the pattern is repeating itself and he or she does not know what the rules are anymore. Most foster kids came from families that were inconsistent. For the first few years of parenting, these parents were often so lenient, set few rules, and never expected kids to pay consequences for their action.

Suddenly, they decide it is time to be firm and go so far the other direction as to almost be abusive. They certainly are not realistic. It takes months before they admit this approach is not working and midstream; they change direction again. Their kids are confused, and by this time probably dizzy.

Another scenario involves the parents who say “if you do this, you will be punished in this way.” When the kids do (let’s say lying), the punishment for that is grounding for a month. Unfortunately, the kids are driving them crazy so they let them out in two weeks. These kids have learned not to believe what you say. They figure they should not worry about rules or consequences since you will weaken or they can get around you. It is always better to keep grounding to a minimum that you can live with, but be consistent.

This does not always work. I had one young man who was grounded for two weeks every time he got drunk. He had the pleasure of my company every two weeks. He would pay his consequence without complaining, then immediately do it again. It eventually
took, but we did not back down. This young man has since attached himself to our family and for all intents and purposes, he is our son. We all lived through it. In some rare instances I also allowed kids to work their way out of grounding for the sake of both our sanity. But the work was in addition to regular chores, time-consuming, and difficult.

Consistency is important in scheduling for the same reasons as in rules. These kids never knew if they would eat or when, what time they would finally go to bed, or if they would actually see the parent that day. We tried to keep to a reasonable schedule in our foster home. It is difficult, but not impossible. Crisis and a tremendous workload make it a challenge, but keep to a schedule if you want calm kids. The unpredictable former lives they have led are a leading factor for problems they have. They might complain to you, but they tend to thrive on set times for everything.

Kids learn to associate certain things with other events, such as homework being done directly before or after supper. Other examples include the bus coming for school exactly one hour after their morning shower, and lights out or quiet time at specific times, followed by sleep.

Consistency should also carry over to love. No matter what kids do, they still need attention and love. That should never be withheld from them as a treatment to help the situation, punishment when they mess up, they need it most of all. See how consistency helps you deal with your kids. And foster parents, thank you for being there.

Jo Ann Wentzel is the mother of three: two children born to her and one foster kid who never left their family, grandmother to five, foster mom to more than 75 kids, and mother, friend, guardian angel, or their worst nightmare, depending on which of the other hundreds of kids whose lives she has touched. This article originally appeared in Fostering Families Today.
Appropriate Boundaries in Parenting
By Sue Laney

What do parents most want from children?

Is it obedience – for children to do what parents think is best whether for the benefit of the child or for the parent? Could it be love – that parents want their children to love them unconditionally as parents try to love their children unconditionally? What about becoming good citizens who are responsible, pleasant to be around, non-offensive to others, and working toward success and independence? And, does love equal respect? So, how do parents get what they most want from their children? The answer is setting appropriate boundaries. These boundaries look and feel different depending on the chosen parenting style. There are typically three styles of parenting with some parents jumping from one style to the other depending on what point or convenience they believe is important to make at the time.

Lines in the Sand
The first boundary style is called “lines in the sand” and the following story will illustrate this parenting style.

Four-year-old Jody and her mother are eating lunch at a local restaurant. Jody wants some gum out of the gum ball machine and asks her mom for some money. When mom says, “Not now, sweetie,” Jody continues to ask and mom continues to deny the request. Mom decides to call a friend on her cell phone and while mom is distracted Jody goes into her mom’s wallet gets a handful of change, puts the coins in the machine and comes back to the table with some gum in her mouth. After a bit, Mom finally notices Jody chewing gum and tells her friend the whole story as Jody listens. Mom expresses to her friend she just doesn’t understand why Jody doesn’t obey. Jody is never personally scolded for her poor choice or instructed how to make a better choice.

Although many parents want to have fun with their children, when a parent draws a line in the sand as the boundary for the child to follow, the relentless waves of the tide come in and wash the line away each time it is drawn. Therefore, what did Jody learn? If this parenting style is used often, Jody will relentlessly test her mom and other authority figures just to see where the boundaries actually are. Often, foster parents are unsure of where to place boundaries on foster children and may be overly lenient to compensate for the hurt foster children have experienced. “Lines in the sand” parenting tells foster children that 1) they are not good enough to have set or standard boundaries and will need to set their own, 2) the parent is incapable of setting appropriate boundaries, or 3) they are special and don’t need to follow the same boundaries as other family members. This parenting style leads birth and foster children toward rebellion breeding chaos, fighting, disrespect, and a low sense of self-worth.
The Brick Wall
The second style of parenting is described as a “brick wall.” Picture it… a tall, thick, red brick wall. Does it signify protection, strength, a sense of durability; or could it be described as more cold, looming, harsh, and impenetrable?

Susan has been parenting for a number of years and now has three teens in her house. “I have to make sure I can maintain order and discipline so we are very strict with the children. We have a very strict curfew and have learned that if we let one child get away with something, everyone else will try to do the same thing. Rules are important and must be obeyed or there is punishment. If there is no punishment for misbehavior, how will these children learn to behave?”

Children need the protection and strength from parents but never do they need parents to be unwelcome, forbidding, rigid, or unforgiving. Children also need the opportunity to learn to make good choices. A safe and comfortable home environment is where children can experience many opportunities to practice making choices. Being allowed to make choices encourages confidence. If children find the answer to their requests always being “no,” or a place where guilt and unforgiveness is the rule of the day, then those children will seek acceptance elsewhere and usually in unfavorable settings. This parenting style also leads children to rebellion breeding chaos, fighting, disrespect, and a low sense of self-worth.

Often children run from rigidity because their inherent sense of free will or freedom of choice is being squelched. Foster children have often been reared in homes which have neglected their needs either through moving or non-existent boundaries, such as “lines in the sand;” or strict boundaries described as “brick wall” parenting.

The Deep Rooted Tree
The two extremes in parenting have been explained leaving the third parenting style of the “deep-rooted tree.” Picture a tall, sturdy tree whose branches spread out over the yard giving shelter, shade, beauty, freedom, creativity, recreation, and a feeling of being tested over time.

Megan is excited to finally get out to the store. Her children, ages five and three keep her jumping most days and she is looking forward to seeing a new comforter that is currently on sale. As she puts her little one in the cart, her oldest starts to scream that he wants to be in the seat, not his sister. No amount of conversation seems to be able to dissuade his desire and a full melt-down ensues. Megan glances at her watch and realizes that it is getting close to supper time and they have been pretty busy all day. She lets her son know that she understands he is tired and hungry and that they can try to do this store another day when everyone is in a better mood.

One of the benefits of this parenting style is the manner in which life’s storms are weathered – with grace, flexibility, and wisdom. There’s no room for arrogance, impatience, or pity. A quiet strength is rooted in good soil, rich with healthy nutrients express-
ing the importance of taking care of oneself and others. There are no inappropriate expectations nor judgement but a joy when family members choose to spend time together under the tree. Delightful flowers and foliage often bring forth delicious fruit allowing others to share from the bounty and the beauty this style offers. When the storms come, deeply planted roots hold the tree upright with a strong trunk. The branches know just how far to bend without breaking from the wind. And so it is with this parenting style.

Creating Strength and Flexibility
As children need strength and wisdom from their parents, they also need flexibility. “Deep-rooted” parenting has a strong foundation supporting children to learn from their personal experiences through proper guidance in making effective choices. These teaching moments become life lessons which mold children’s character and prepare them to respond appropriately in future situations.

As foster parents, strength with flexibility offered to all children shows parents care about children as individuals, that parents believe in children and trust their ability to make good choices for their level of development. Children experience freedom and peace when acting within appropriate boundaries. In return, through time, parents will receive the love and respect that they demonstrate to others.

Although flexibility is the key element in appropriate boundaries, determining how far a parent is willing to go and being consistent in not going beyond the boundary limit is crucial. A rubber band has several uses but is most commonly used for holding things close or together. It can only be stretched so far before it pops. When the band does pop, it is no longer as useful; it stings anything near it; and if the ends are tied together again to resume its initial purpose, there is less room to perform its purpose inside the band. Therefore flexibility has its limits.

Appropriate parenting boundaries are defined as: the structure from which to operate, which is geared for protection and effective living, offering freedom to act within the limits, while encompassing positive, and negative consequences for reinforcement of the structure. Without boundaries we have chaos, conflict, and confusion.

When setting boundaries ask the question, “Is this boundary used for protection and teaching or is it for my comfort?” Keeping the child’s best interest at heart will help to ensure boundaries remain appropriate. Use boundaries suitable for the appropriate age and stage of the child’s development and use reasonable punishment to fit the crime. Pay attention to the behavior you want to see by using many more rewards than punishments. The best rewards are praise, hugs, or a pat on the back, which don’t cost any money. And if you want children to obey, they have to trust in you – not just trust you, but in you – trusting that you always have their best interests at heart.

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Cycle of Want
Assuming emotional needs continue to be met, an older child learns to calm and self-regulate through a parent’s yes or no response to their “want.” The circle must be completed for positive learning to take place.

Child Wants

Child Behaves (Asks, Cries, Whines, Begs, etc.)

Adult Decides Yes or No

Child Calms with Parent’s Help

Parents say yes or no based on what is best for their child. Calming is what completes the cycle, not saying “yes” for peace and quiet. You teach self-control and belief in parents.

Doris Landry, MS

The Extra Layer and Discipline Strategies
By Deborah Moore
Based on the work of Doris Landry, MS with permission.

Successfully disciplining an adopted or foster child takes the extra layer of adoption/loss into consideration. On top of whatever method of discipline you choose, therapist Doris Landry, MS, suggests adding these three basic tools to dramatically increase its effectiveness.

Understand. It is important for parents to help children understand the meaning of their actions. For instance, children who were hit, slapped, kicked or restrained in their previous life experiences may replicate those behaviors under duress, without understanding why. When a child misbehaves, and you can recognize where the behavior comes from, it can be helpful to explain the relationship between his or her actions and his or her past.

Express empathy. With empathy, parents can help children see that while their behavior is bad, they are not bad. When children are taken into your parents’ arms and engage in meaningful dialog about the “why” of what happened, parents are not condoning the misbehavior, but rather helping children understand the origin and the meaning of the behavior.

Re-attune. The child’s understanding and the parent’s empathy together lead to a re-attunement between parent and child, allowing for the child to express sorrow for hurting the other person. The child is then able to learn, change, and openly accept guidance and correction.

The past experiences of these children necessitates considering different models for discipline. Some of the best advice I ever received about disciplining my children, was to have a “toolbox” of techniques. Landry, in her “Discipline with an Adoption Twist” workshop, outlines seven different discipline “tools.” These are all basic, well-known methods, but with an explanatory adoption/loss “twist” for our children’s extra layers.

The Toolbox…1-2-3 Magic.
This book, written by Thomas W. Phelan, PhD, asserts that parents who treat children as little adults, and often spend way too much time trying to persuade our children that we are right. Parents talk too much and with too much emotion, which actually provokes the child. This can lead to
yelling and even eventually to hitting. The 1-2-3 Magic philosophy:

1) A parent gives one explanation only.

2) A parent’s authority is not negotiable.

After giving the one explanation, the parent then begins to count. If the misbehavior doesn’t stop as a result of the explanation, the parent warns, “That’s one.” If the misbehavior continues, the parent says, “That’s two.” If the child is still misbehaving the parent says, “That’s three” and gives the child a time-out. The parent is not to argue with the child, or lecture the child. After the time-out, the child re-joins the family.

The Adoption Twist: Parents should not send the child off to another room as suggested in 1-2-3. Rather, by keeping them close and modeling calm, controlled behavior parents help the child regulate by not allowing him or her to escalate. This method takes the emotion out of the discipline, which will help the child re-attune with the parent.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk.
This popular book written by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish gives parents four techniques for successful listening (a key piece of communication and attunement):

Listen with full attention. When you only half listen, children just give up even trying to talk with their parents. But when you give them your full attention, they feel special and want to talk with you even more.

Show a caring attitude. Children don’t always want you to fix their problems. They may just need to know that you care about them and what they’re feeling. You can often communicate your caring with just a word, such as “Oh” or “I see,” or “Mmmm...” The child will know he or she was heard.

Deal with feelings, both the parents’ and child’s. How often do we as parents try to deny what our children are feeling? Our child will try to express emotion, and we quickly jump in telling him not to feel that way. Instead we need to help them deal with their feelings by naming those feelings. Statements such as “you are sad,” “what a shock that was for you,” or “you really cared about your friend” will help your child feel that you understand him or her.

You don’t need to fix it. Don’t try to solve the problem. Parents often try to explain things with adult reasoning. Telling a 2-year-old that you don’t have any Toastie Crunches in the house doesn’t mean anything to him or her. All the child knows is that he or she wants them now! Instead, give into the child’s wishes and fantasy. How much easier it is for a child to go along with you when you fantasize right along with him or her about how wonderful a box of Toastie Crunches would be. When mom wants it as much as the child does, how can he or she argue?

Faber and Mazlish also offer help in gaining cooperation from our children. Parents can talk to their kids in such a way that the kids will naturally listen.

Describe the problem. Simply stating the problem as you see it is much better than blaming, yelling, or coercing. The point is made without blame and without emotion. It does not put the child on the defensive. Instead of “You haven’t taken the dog out all day. You don’t deserve to have a pet,” try “I see Rover pacing up and down near the door.”
Use one word. Instead of yelling at your child again for walking out without his or her lunch, simply say “lunch.” Again, don’t express blame or accusation toward your child.

Talk about your feelings. Instead of yelling at your child for pulling on your sleeve, tell him or her calmly, “I don’t like having my sleeve pulled.” It is more difficult for a child to argue with how his or her behavior makes you feel.

The Adoption Twist: The goal of the Faber/Mazlish method is to help children change unacceptable behavior without making them feel threatened, attacked, or rejected, and also to help parents learn to listen so children feel genuinely heard. This is particularly important for the adopted child, who may have a heightened sensitivity to not being heard or understood. The parents need to be mindful of not falling into the adoptive parent discipline trap, and should avoid:

- Giving in to the child’s demands out of fear that the child won’t love them.
- Being overly dismissive of the feelings that an adoptive child is trying to express (not really listening).

Behavior Modification.
This relies on rewarding positive behavior in order to increase the frequency of such behavior. Any behavior will increase if followed by something pleasant. The reward can be either material, verbal, or time spent together. Parents need to be careful when using this approach, and consider whether not reaching a reward will wrongly affect their child’s self-esteem, and if the system is reinforcing the correct behavior.

One way to use the behavior modification technique is with the use of a reward chart. Once the problem behavior has been identified and agreed upon by the parents, it then needs to be discussed and agreed upon by the child. Allowing your children to help select the rewards and help in designing the chart is usually greeted with great enthusiasm. It’s important to set a start date, and commit to a consistent time of filling out the chart. For some kids, behavior modification doesn’t work. If, after implementing this technique, you see that it is not working for your child, then you need to question why. Perhaps it is because your child has significant control issues, or doesn’t truly trust his or her parents to know what’s best for him or her, both of which are not uncommon in adopted children. Parents may need to seek professional help.

The Adoption Twist: An important thing to remember about this discipline technique is that the rewards should be only positive, such as more time spent together, or choosing dessert for that night, or playing a favorite game together. Behavior Modification is really just a helpful indicator to measure if your child can be amenable to change...or if the problems run deeper. If a simple additional story at bedtime is motivation for a reward you are well on your way to a healthy relationship. If nothing motivates the child, then there is cause for concern; children normally are motivated by positive incentives.
Time-Out.
Time-out is a common discipline technique that often needs modification in order to be appropriate for a child who:
• has been recently adopted
• has not fully attached to his or her parents
• struggles with anxiety related to separation from his or her parents
Time-out involves separation of the child and parent by sending the child to a designated room away from the family. But a child who has attachment issues, or who is just learning to trust a new family, should never be forced away from the parents. Using time-out, but with the adoption “twist,” the parent still disciplines the child, but places him or her in a location close by.

Another adaptation of time-out takes place with the child sitting in the parent’s lap to calm down and “think.” A tantruming child can be kept safe in a parent’s arms and lap while mom or dad is sitting on the floor. An out-of-control child may scream to get away, but desperately needs the calm, safe physical security of his or her parent.

The Adoption Twist: Time-out minimizes the shame response that adopted children are so easily prone to. This type of time-out is a positive example of disciplining a bad behavior, while always helping the child feel emotionally and physically secure.

Time-In.
Time-in is a variation of the time-out technique mentioned above. According to Landry, the goal of time-in is for a chronically misbehaving child to experience a successful day. When a child repeatedly misbehaves and does not respond to other disciplinary methods, a time-in may be appropriate. The parent explains to the child that he or she is going to help him or her have a good day by keeping the child nearby, and helping him or her make good decisions throughout their time together. The child is kept physically close to the parent, usually within arms length, for as long as the parent thinks necessary. As the parents go about their day with their child beside them, they are able to talk together about the child’s misbehavior and the feelings that caused it. The parents are also able to correct any subsequent misbehavior or bad attitude, because they can address the issues immediately, as they surface. The key to the success of this technique is for the parent to be loving and empathetic toward the child, as the parent helps the child make good choices.

The Adoption Twist: The physical closeness of the parent and the time spent together gives the parent and child an opportunity to process the child’s feelings and surfaced behaviors. The parent must present a time-in as a help to the child, not as a punishment. The idea is to promote a “we are going to do this together” team feeling. Time-in is a wonderful opportunity to practice and strengthen attunement between parent and child.

Love and Logic.
Love and Logic parenting, created by Foster Cline and Jim Fay, is an approach to raising
children that puts parents in control and teaches responsibility to children. This is accomplished by parents setting firm limits in a loving way, and making sure the child knows in advance exactly what is expected of him or her. The child then experiences natural consequences for his or her actions, both good and bad, and is held accountable for his or her actions and for solving his or her own problems. The parent expresses empathy toward the child for making a bad choice, but does not bail the child out of the problem or try to solve it for him or her. The Love and Logic approach is normally a positive technique, yet for the post-institutionalized child, or the child who has been neglected, abused, or shuffled from family to family, the “natural consequence” may not be known to him or her. Time is needed for the parent to teach and train the child, and to establish a basis of trust. If trust has not been established, then natural consequences can be shaming rather than instructive.

The Adoption Twist: Coaching the child may be a necessary adjunct to implementing Love and Logic, as some of life’s lessons may have been missed, especially if the child was adopted from an orphanage or from foster care. Coaching focuses on teaching the child appropriate behavior. Instead of just telling a child to stop a behavior, the parent teaches the child societal expectations, and what appropriate behavior looks like. This builds an alliance between the child and his or her parent.

60-Second Scolding.
A 60-second scolding is another highly effective discipline technique. When the child misbehaves, the parent comes close to the child and makes eye contact, even gently holding his or her face if necessary. The parent tells the child, firmly but without shouting, how the child’s actions affected the parent. The parent then softens his or her voice, hugs the child and tells the child how much he or she is loved and assures him or her it is the parent’s job to take care of the child, and together they will work through the problem.

The Adoption Twist: The 60-second scolding is intense and honest, provides immediate intervention and ends on a nurturing note, affirming the parent’s love and commitment toward the child. Most parents scold, walk away, and proceed with life as though nothing has happened. The adopted child is profoundly affected by disciplinary action, so the re-attunement “twist” is vital. This technique is powerful in its simplicity and works well for the adopted child, as it fosters a quick re-attunement between parent and child.

Deborah Moore is an adoptive mom of two daughters. This article is excerpted from the article titled, “Discipline with an Adoption Twist,” which originally appeared in the book Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections (EMK Press 2006) and is based on the work of Doris Landry, MS, LLP.
Dealing With Control
Living with a child-sized control freak can be frustrating. Battling a child’s tenacious will over endless inconsequential interactions is wearying work. Giving the child many choices over his or her daily life doesn’t seem to end the ongoing problem, either. How can a parent help a child deal with a need for control that has invaded home, school, and the child’s friendships?

Remove Yourself. It’s not about the parent finding a way to eradicate the problem, it’s about the child. A child’s continued need for control is indicative of his or her feeling intrinsically out-of-control, and has nothing to do with what you might have attempted to do to help your child change.

Ask Your Child. Create a dialog with your child to really find out what is fueling the undesirable control-behavior. How does the child feel inside when he or she has the need to take control? What is going on within the child that needs to be addressed? A child who is helped to recognize the fear or anger his or her need for control is masking, can take steps toward awareness and consciously work at letting go of the need for control. A securely attached child cares about what his or her parents think and feel, and wants to please them. Parents who understand the true issue of control can deal with the issue at its core, and not waste time and effort on the resulting symptoms. Needing control is a tough behavior to break, but a child who knows that his or her present negative behavior is based on feelings and experiences in the past, will be able to work on a new pattern with the guidance of his or her family.

– Doris Landry, MS, LLP

Becoming Your Foster Child’s Emotional Tutor
By Allison Maxon, MS, MFT

Children in foster care have all experienced varying degrees of abuse, neglect, and multiple placements. They typically have increased social, emotional, and behavioral problems, most often due to their inability to modulate internal affective or feeling states. These children have experienced overwhelming amounts of internal emotional distress at an age when they were ill-equipped to manage their emotional states. The end result is that children in foster care have increased behavioral problems, and these behavioral problems create distress for the families with whom they are living.

We know that punishing these children is ineffective, as punishment does not actively add or teach anything. In fact, when parents use negative reinforcement, it most typically reinforces negative behaviors. What these children most need to learn is how to regulate or manage their internal emotional states. They need to develop the skill of returning to a state of calm after a stressful experience. But how does a child with social and emotional deficits learn these critical life skills? Hired for the job – foster parents who are willing and able to become their foster child’s emotional tutor.

Emotional Intelligence
Becoming your foster child’s emotional tutor is no easy task. It requires that parents have increased emotional intelligence. This does not mean that parents have to be perfect and never show any negative emotion, such as anger and frustration. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Your child needs you to express all of your emotions – not
just the warm fuzzy ones, so he or she can see how it’s done. The difference here is that parents with increased emotional intelligence are not just “emotionally reacting” to external stressors, they are able to model healthy ways to manage their own internal distress.

A parent with increased emotional intelligence might say, “Mom is frustrated right now, I’m going to take a few minutes to calm down before we talk about how we’re going to solve this problem.” With increased emotional intelligence, we begin to see and understand that most of our emotional reactions are the result of our own internal perceptions and interpretations. So instead of saying, “you make me so mad,” we would be correct in saying, “I make myself so mad when I perceive or think about...” The golden rule when emotionally tutoring your child is to be mindful that we, as parents, are modeling our own emotional intelligence all the time. Children in our care are always learning from our example. It is much like teaching your child a dance. Our own dance is the dance we teach. Is that dance reactive and impulsive, attentive and loving, or busy and detached?

The Emotional Dance
When a parent is emotionally tutoring a high-needs child, it is critical that the parent leads the emotional dance. So when the high-needs child is in a state of distress, anger or hyperarousal, it is imperative that the parent responds to the needs of the child by providing the external regulation that is necessary to return the child to a state of calmness. Because the child’s early attachment needs were not met, they cannot “internally” regulate their affective states. So using interventions like room time or time-outs are often ineffective because this would assume that the child could auto-regulate or self-soothe.

In emotional tutoring, the parents are always thinking about what they are actively teaching, or adding to the child’s skill repertoire. What does the child’s behavior indicate that he or she needs? It is important to note that the question is always, what does the child need to learn? Is this behavioral issue related to a skill deficit? What is the underlying need? What the child is saying verbally he or she wants and what he or she needs are not the same thing. The child is most often stuck in a defensive pattern of reacting, and does not have increased insight into what he or she needs.

The goal here would be to increase the child’s ability to return to a state of calm after a dysregulating event, so the parent would use a time-in, where the parent provides the external structure the child needs to return to a state of calm. The parent would remove the child from the stimulating environment and proceed to down-regulate the child. With a small child this would involve rocking, singing, deep pressure rubs down the spine; with an older child it might involve taking a walk together, exercising, listening to music or expressive arts.

Once the child is in a state of calm, a re-do is always the consequence, as the child learns most quickly through experience. A re-do is where the desired behavior is practiced. Once the child is successful, the parent bathes the child in affective pleasure – “good job, look how smart you are!” or “Wow, look what you can do, I’m so proud of you!” When children’s early attachment needs are not met, their ability to relax, attend and think through solutions – is greatly diminished.

Foster children desperately need their foster parents to actively tutor them emotionally, but this requires that parents think non-traditionally about how they are responding to...
misbehavior. When a parent can remain calm in the eye of the storm, and model for their child in care how to manage internal distress, the child learns the dance of increased emotional intelligence, which is how to think before one reacts.

**Emotions Are Contagious**

Emotions are contagious; it’s easy to “catch” an emotion. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge for foster parents today. Children in foster care live with chronic, overwhelming emotional distress, which means foster parents live in an environment where their emotional states and skills are being constantly taxed. It is most typical to respond to an angry child with anger, a defiant child with defiance and a distressed child with distress.

Emotional tutoring requires that the foster parent does not follow the child into a negative emotional state, but becomes the leader of the emotional dance between parent and child and actually pulls the child out of distress, frustration, and anger. This is most easily done when parents model their own healthy emotional coping skills, like using humor to help alleviate stress, “Can anyone tell mommy a joke right now, because I sure need to laugh?”

Emotional tutors are aware that they are setting the emotional tone within the family and develop a bag of tricks to alleviate the stress that the child in care brings into the home. This bag of tricks can include things like: joke night at the dinner table, all-day pajama day, costume night where all members have to dress up and stay in character, role-reversal night at the dinner table where the kids fix dinner and the parents get to whine, or playing feelings charades. Foster parents who are able to be creative and playful, will find that they are teaching the kids in their care how to cope effectively with life’s stressors.

**The Healing Power of Play**

One of the biggest problems for many children in care is that they have not experienced enough pleasure. The first five years of life are supposed to be filled with loads of pleasure, fun and play. In fact, play is the language of children. They learn best through play. But what if the child does not know how to play? This may sound like a small problem, but in reality, it is enormous for the child in care.

Giving and receiving pleasure is one of the most important things the child learns in the early parent and child attachment relationship. Human connections are supposed to be pleasurable, but what if the child has not learned this, and subsequently does not know how to give and receive pleasure? And what if the child is stuck in chronic states of distress, and does not know how to pull him or herself out of these states? Again, what the child most needs is emotional tutoring.

One of the best ways to tutor the child is to engage him or her daily in play. Each time you play with the child in care, you replace distress with pleasure, frustration with laughter, and isolation with connectedness. In addition, you will provide the child with the experiences that he or she needs to strengthen emotional and social development. The child will learn good impulse control when he or she is playing a board game where he or she is required to take turns. The child will learn how to think in a more organized way when playing structured games that have a beginning, middle, and end. They will learn how to express their feelings with words when they play “feelings charades.” They will
learn how to be sensitive to other people’s needs and cues as they play social games.

Cooperative games are best because the players together are playing against the game rather than competing against each other. They will learn how to attend and focus when they are engaged in games like Concentration, Clue, and other similar games. But most of all, they will slowly learn how to replace chronic distress with pleasure, fun, and play. They will develop coping skills that will last a lifetime. In fact, social and emotional skills have been found to be more critical to life’s success than one’s intellectual ability.

Yes, it is true that children in care have been negatively impacted by abuse, neglect or multiple placements. Children in foster care come to families with social and emotional skill deficits. These deficits create parenting challenges for foster parents. The good news is that children change, grow, and heal within the context of a healing relationship. So now we have another skill to add to the foster parents’ resume. You are hired for the job – emotional tutor.

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Foster Parents can best help the children they care for by actually caring for them and not treating them like a business. The children would be better behaved and more open to rules if they were treated like they were loved...

– Ashley Radford, former foster youth who was in the system for 11 years.
Dear Dr. Kenny: Family Talk and Discipline
By Drs. James and Mary Kenny

Family Talk is a regular column in *Fostering Families Today* magazine. Drs. Kenny and Kenny offer a pragmatic perspective on discipline from their own experience with parenting 12 children and fostering many.

Kids Need Discipline, Not Punishment

Dear Dr. Kenny: Is spanking kids child abuse? What's wrong with a good swift swat to a well-padded bottom? Let the child learn that misbehavior will result in punishment. If more parents took their responsibility seriously, we would have far less delinquency today.

– New Hampshire

Dear New Hampshire: I agree with your last statement, that parents need to take child rearing seriously. Punishment, however, is a poor way to motivate and discipline children.

Is spanking child abuse? Technically, in most states that depends on whether the spanking leaves marks that can be seen a day later. Whether or not spanking qualifies as child abuse, it is wrong-minded. Many states forbid foster parents to use physical punishment. Verbal abuse can be even worse. Whether the tongue-lashing involves obvious demeaning and put-downs or whether the abuse is more subtle, inducing guilt in the child, verbal abuse strikes at the soul. Punishment itself is questionable. Punishment is not good discipline because it does not work well to obtain the desired result. Discipline includes many more effective techniques for stopping misbehavior and obtaining compliance.

Discipline is the total character-molding of the child through love, example, praise and attention for good behavior, and ignoring punishment for bad behavior. Punishment may provide a short-term deterrent so long as the parent is bigger, stronger, and in control. Usually, punishment is the last resort of a frustrated and unskilled parent. If punishment was effective, advertisers would use it. Have you seen or heard an ad that threatened bad consequences such as loss of popularity or financial insecurity unless you use the product? No, because such an approach would not induce us to buy what they were selling. Ads stay positive.

Too often children are subjected to a barrage of what’s wrong with them. The child, confronted with constant yelling, scolding, moralizing and spanking will learn that either he or she is a bad character or that parents are to be avoided. Or more simply, the child will turn off and tune out. Punishment, with its focus on misbehavior, fails to inform a child what he or she should do. Identifying the misbehavior, targeting its opposite and rewarding being on time with small privileges is more likely to be effective. The rewarding indicates clearly what is required and gives attention to the appropriate behavior.

The most serious indictment of punishment is that it encourages the behavior that parents are trying to eliminate. By focusing on the undesirable behavior, parents are providing valued time and attention for the wrong thing. The time and attention that accompany
Discipline

punishment is called “secondary gain.” Too often the secondary gain outweighs the primary painfulness.

What parent has not exclaimed, “The more I get after him, the worse he gets. He’s just doing it to get attention.” Of course he is, so try a better way.

If punishment worked well, parents would not have to use it so often. So why do parents punish? Probably because they believe that punishment hurts and children will behave to avoid the hurt. The key question parents should ask however, is does punishment work?

Curing Bad Language

Dear Dr. Kenny: My 12-year-old grandson uses foul language, words that I could never even write in my letter to you. He has been punished at school, but he thinks it’s cool. His mother has tried everything. How can we get him to clean up his mouth?

— Pennsylvania

Dear Pennsylvania: One of the biggest mistakes that all of us make is to give too much attention to bad behavior. We explain, correct, threaten, and punish our children when they use foul language. We fail to understand that in providing attention to bad behavior, we are rewarding it. I am sure that’s the last thing your daughter wants to do.

Every one of us has complained, “The more I get after that child, the worse he gets.” Then in exasperation we add, “He’s just doing it to get attention.” Of course that’s exactly what he is doing. So why do we keep getting suckered in?

We keep on being ineffective for two reasons.

• First, we confuse our parenting goal with our strategy. The goal is fine. The strategy is counterproductive. But it sounds so right to our adult ears.

• Second, it’s the only way we know, talking the misbehavior to death. If that doesn’t work, we talk louder. If it still isn’t working, we punish. And if that worked, you wouldn’t be writing us. Your grandson is getting too much attention for his bad language.

The trick is to identify the opposite behavior and reward that with your time and attention or with some small token. If the opposite occurs, then the foul talk does not happen. What is the opposite of foul language? The answer is “not using foul language.” So simple and obvious. Yet it is hard to reward a nonoccurrence. Here is a plan for doing just that. I call it the “happy mouth” plan.

Johnnie will clean up his mouth. Each third of one day — before school, after school and after supper — that he does not use any of foul language — make a list of the inappropriate words — or raise his voice, he will earn one happy-mouth point.

Parents score his success, or lack thereof, immediately with a 1 or 0 on the wall calendar. The points are worth a small token reward.

My most popular rewards are slips of paper concealed in a love jar. The child may select a slip for every five points. The slips allow for endless possibilities: breakfast in bed, a slice of pizza, dad will stand on his head and sing the school song.
Other possible rewards might be awarded for each point and include: Five minutes of closely supervised drawing time, five cents, a handful of trail mix, staying up late for 10 extra minutes. Including the child in the planning is a good strategy. By asking the child what rewards he values, you are enlisting his cooperation. The rewards should be immediate and small. They are not a bribe. They are simply a way of reversing the attention factor and responding with a token thank you when the desired behavior occurs.

We need to catch our children right in the act of being good and let them know we notice. Good luck.

Teaching Respect to Your Children

Dear Dr. Kenny: Adults are rude to one another, and children are even more so. Politicians, talk show hosts, everyone seems to enjoy being hurtful and confrontational. Music lyrics are mean. Why have we become so uncivil? Are we failing as parents to teach our children respect? What can I do as a parent?

– New Jersey

Dear New Jersey: You are right. We are going through an uncivil time in our country. I suspect that it is related to our desire for dominance. As we compete with one another for more and more goods, we adults find that meanness works. Putting down the other person is effective in battling for a prize. Smaller families may amplify this tendency. With fewer or no siblings, children grow up without the normal give-and-take between brothers and sisters. They have less opportunity to learn social skills.

Teaching children respect is high on every parent’s list of requirements. Parents can deal with this epidemic of rudeness in several ways. Parents teach mainly by example. Parents should keep careful watch on their own language and gentility. Here are some things to look for:

• Use “I” messages. (I don’t like hitting.) Speak your own mind and wishes without putting your partner or your child down. Assertiveness is certainly possible without offending or hurting.

• Avoid judging or blaming. The best way to achieve this is to avoid using “you” when making a request by confronting someone.
  “I want the table set now” is better than, “You get busy and set the table.”
  “It’s bedtime and I want lights out” is better than, “You get to bed right now before I have to come in there.”

• Avoid put-downs. No name-calling and no sarcasm. No one should be called “stupid” or any of the many crude and obscene slang terms.

One way to help raise your own parental consciousness might be to list the words and phrases to be avoided. Offer to put a quarter in a “fun jar” every time your children catch you using one of these terms.

Teaching respect can be turned into a game. Identify nice ways of saying things. Award “nice” points and keep score. Some obvious social graces include:

• Saying “thank you,” “I’m sorry,” and “please.”

• Asking to be excused from the table.

• Making requests in the proper manner, without demanding.

• Going for specified time periods without any name-calling or other put-downs.
Finally, parents might use the restate technique. When a child is rude or disrespectful, don’t respond with anger. Instead, ask your child to restate his or her request or comment in an acceptable and civil way. For example, if your son calls his brother “stupid” help him restate what he means. Perhaps he might say: “That’s not the way I would do it,” or “I am mad at you.”

If your daughter demands you do something right now, help her restate the request in an assertive but less hurtful way. She might say “please” or “I would like it if I could.”

Parental example, making manners a game and requiring children to restate their disrespectful remarks in an acceptable and more effective style are good ways to combat rudeness.

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Picking Your Battles
By Jo Ann Wentzel

Foster kids rarely have just one area where problems exist. Most kids, in fact, have several bad behaviors to correct, issues they must overcome, and goals they must reach. The foster parents see their job as mender, fixer, or repair person. We are never content to just let these issues resolve themselves, and rightly so. We arm ourselves with ideas, solutions, and prayer to battle the various problems.

One thing wrong with this strategy is the fact that we attack on all fronts, instead of focusing on just one enemy at a time. Foster parents must pick their battles carefully. There are two basic reasons that this is best. Number one is the fact that kids cannot usually successfully work on a whole array of problems at one time. The second reason is for the sake of the foster parent. You will burn out too quickly if you don’t reserve your strength.

But you say, these kids have soooo many problems. They need so much help. You count off the problems on your fingers, but before you get to your toes, slow down. Try to remember it took many years for these problems to develop. You cannot fix this kid by Friday. You will need to pick your battles.

This assessment to decide which war you wage may take a bit of time. It is also hard to do when you still don’t know the child well. Until you truly connect with a kid, you must rely on first impressions and what you have actually witnessed.

It is necessary to prioritize this child’s needs when deciding which behaviors to conquer, and help him meet challenges necessary for a functional life. We developed a system. First, list all the major problems. Put things in perspective, this is usually not going to include things like he does not make his bed, or he forgets to brush his teeth. If these are this kid’s most pressing problem, pat
yourself on the back, give him a big hug, and be content that you are so lucky. I’m thinking more in the terms of items like he is violent toward others, he uses pot, he steals, or he cannot stay in school. You know – the kinds of issues foster parents deal with every day.

Next, start to prioritize them. I tend to divide them into the following categories.

1. Behaviors, activities, or problems that are dangerous to other’s well being.
2. Behaviors, activities, or problems that are dangerous to the foster child’s physical well-being.
3. Behaviors, activities, or problems that are dangerous to other’s mental/emotional well-being.
4. Behaviors, activities, or problems that are dangerous to the foster child’s mental/emotional well-being.
5. Behaviors, activities, or problems that are against the law.
6. Behaviors, activities, or problems that interfere with the foster child’s education.
7. Behaviors, activities, or problems that interfere with the running of the household.
8. All other negative behaviors, activities, or problems that you need work on.

Start at the top and work your way down. Work on one problem to its solution before tackling another one. The only time you should break this rule is when you are getting nowhere after months and months of work then focus on another problem for awhile, going back to the first after the new one is solved.

You may see this list differently than others do and change the arrangement of priorities. Even foster parents have pet peeves, pet projects, or their own things that drive them crazy. I remember one foster mom who took really tough kids. The only ones she would refuse were those with blue hair. Drove her crazy. We can laugh about such a silly thing, but if the child is where you can see him, day after day and a little thing sets you off, you will be unable to parent that kid effectively. I believe foster parents should always have the option to decide if a child will fit into their home and lifestyle. There are so many kids out there; we should be able to accommodate most parents. I also believe their requests should be reasonable, blue hair is probably not a real valid excuse, but I can understand it just the same.

I feel any behavior that can lead to death or injury for anyone must be number one on your list. That battle has a high chance of casualties if you do not attack there. One battle at a time, unless the problem will prove to be a small, little skirmish. Kids can work effectively on correcting one behavior. They will be more successful if they believe this is the one thing that will please you (and shut you up). When you approach with a long list in hand, they don’t fight, they don’t surrender, and they just play dead. They don’t hear you or even care what you are saying. It is impossible to redirect them. It is impossible to implement a plan or develop a procedure. They have turned you off, and they will not be part of your little war since they are sure they cannot win. Make it easier on them by giving them one front to battle at a time. Then, everyone wins.

To all foster parents who have taken up arms to battle for our kids, I commend you.

Jo Ann Wenzel is mother of three, two children born to her and one foster kid who never left their family, grandmother to five, foster mom to more than 75 kids, and mother, friend, guardian angel, or worst nightmare, depending on which of the other hundreds of kids you ask.
How to Use The Behavior Management Strategy of The Re-do
By Carol Lozier, LCSW

Karyn Purvis, PhD, and David Cross, PhD, wrote “The Connected Child: Bring hope and healing to your Adopted Family.” This book has great behavioral management tools including, the re-do. Purvis and Cross state, “The beauty of a re-do is that it catches an inappropriate action in progress and says, “Whoa! Let’s go back and do this again differently.” Immediate practice is an aid to developing mastery, just like any skill – whether it’s riding a bicycle, learning to read, or playing a game. By actively replacing misbehavior with correct behavior in your child’s memory banks, you can help the child encode competency.”

To further explain, parents use a re-do when their child is in the middle of, or immediately following, an inappropriate behavior. In a re-do, ask your child to stop the inappropriate behavior and try again, but this time choosing an appropriate behavior. We want children to re-do behavior because it provides the opportunity to learn healthier behavior and it allows their brains to experience the correct behavioral choice.

You may wonder, “Why is it important to let my child’s brain experience the correct behavior?” The answer is, the child has to experience the correct behavior for his or her brain to translate it into habit. Parents also need to verbally explain the better choice but the most effective way for a child to learn new behavior is to repeatedly do the appropriate behavior.

Let’s look at the example of six-year-old Jesse and her mom, Mary. In a therapy session, Mary learns about the re-do and quickly puts it into practice. In public, Jesse runs ahead of mom even though the family rule is: We hold hands and walk together. The next time Jesse runs ahead mom catches up to her and asks her to re-do this behavior. Mary says, “Jesse, our family rule is to hold hands and walk together. Let’s go back to the beginning and try it again.” Together, they go back to the beginning and re-do the walk in an appropriate way. At the end of the re-do, Mary verbally praises Jesse’s cooperation and appropriate behavior, “Thank you so much for following our family rule about walking.”

Re-do’s are an invaluable behavioral strategy to use with foster and adopted children. And it is a powerful tool for children from preschool age through the teen years. Look for the next chance to help your child’s brain turn behavior into habit!

Carol Lozier, LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice; she specializes in helping foster and adopted children and families. She graduated from Florida State University in 1989 with a master’s degree in social work. Visit her blog at www.fosteradoptchildtherapist.com.
Experience
By Veronica Brown

Not so long ago, my nine-year-old was about an hour into an episode in his bedroom.

My older foster son came into my room. “Geez, is he still at it?”
“Yup.”
“How much longer?”
“Well, after he broke his glasses, he came up to his room and when he slammed his door, the trim came off. So now he’s mad and panicking. I think Jason thinks he’s going to get kicked out.”
“Did you tell him he’s not getting kicked out?”
“A bunch of times. But he’s not hearing me. In his experience, this sort of stuff gets him moved. I keep going in to try to talk to him, but it’s not helping. I’ll just let him get it out of his system.”
“Isn’t that driving you crazy?”
“Kinda.”
“He’s been doing this a lot lately. Is it going to get better?”
“Of course it’s going to get better. I’ve been here before.”

I had been there before. But I hadn’t always been that calm or confident.

Early in my foster parenting career, I had a boy who was prone to rages. I remember all the different ways I dealt with him. I tried calmly talking him out of his temper and I tried shouting back. I tried ignoring him and I tried standing there watching. And sometimes I would sit on the floor outside his bedroom door, head in my hands wondering “what do I do now?”

I remember the overwhelming feeling of failure. I remember the fear, the despair, the hopelessness. I remember thinking that I hadn’t been able to reach this child at all. It seemed that he had a meltdown every day. And I couldn’t picture that changing. I grew up in a loving, supportive home and had many successes in my life. I’ve experienced hardship, but I’ve always had my family to help me stay positive. And still, I had difficulty picturing success with this boy. I had a hard time seeing the situation getting any better.

But it did. Support from social workers, a very special therapist and several schools all combined to make that placement successful. I don’t even remember the tipping point. I don’t remember when things started getting better. They just did.

If you focus, absolutely, on putting one foot in front of the other, oftentimes you look up and can’t believe how far you’ve come.

I’ve had more than a few foster kids since that boy. And now I have all that experience to draw from. Not only the skills I developed, but also the mistakes I made. Strategies learned in training classes and from individual sessions with professionals. I’ve discovered my strengths and my weaknesses and how to use both. Most important of all: I’ve seen healing. I’ve been a participant and a witness and I have known success.
Jason had never experienced that kind of success. Small accomplishments, sure, but not the kind of achievement that brings personal confidence or a sense of optimism. He never had the chance to work through problems with the help of someone else. He never witnessed things getting better; hard work paying off; someone standing by him through thick and thin, sick and sin.

Jason’s experience included being picked up early from school and told he was moving to a new foster home right now. He knew what the world looked like when turned upside-down. He knew failure. He knew the beginning of the end. And while he was throwing his clothes and toys around his room, he knew it was the end. In his mind, if he was going to get kicked out – he was going to go out in a blaze of glory. You can’t fire me – I quit!!

Well, I didn’t fire him and I didn’t let him quit.

And eventually the identified objects stopped flying. The mad got tired and the panic wore down. All that was left were the tears. The awful, gasping sounds of grieving. Mourning the past, regretting the present, and unable to imagine a future. And that was my cue. I knocked and was granted permission to enter. “Do you want some help putting your stuff back?” A nod was all he could manage.

And as we cleaned I asked him, “Have I ever told you about my first year with Shawn?”

Veronica Brown has been a foster parent in Canada since 1995. She primarily takes in boys aged nine and up and usually has a handful at any given time.