

Positive Guidance for Hard-to-Handle Kids: Parenting Education for Foster Parents

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November, 1998
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Program Description

Foster parents face numerous and complex challenges. Discipline may be one of the most difficult tasks in striving to positively guide a foster child. Foster children come from varied and uncertain pasts and they bring with them a unique set of challenges. This lesson will discuss some of the behaviors of hard-to-handle kids and explore some of the prevention and intervention strategies parents can use to guide their foster child's behavior.

Program Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify hard-to-handle behaviors and temperament traits.
2. Learn positive discipline techniques for hard-to-handle behaviors.
3. Gain confidence in their role as a foster parent.

Intended Audience

Foster parents of children ages 3 - 12.

Materials Needed

- Overhead Projector and Screen
- Overhead Transparencies
- Photocopied pages and envelopes for ice breaker activity
- Flipchart and 5 different color markers for summary activity
- Sponge shapes and plastic sand bucket for wrap-up activity
- Handouts for participants:
- Parenthood & Parenting - FCS 477
- Effective Ways To Discipline School Age Children - FCS 407
- Appropriate Limits For Young Children - FCS 455 & 456
- Childhood Aggression - Where Does It Come From - FCS 504
- Brain Development - FCS 481
- Common Questions About Time Out
- Your Home Economy Chart

Topics and Time Frame

Introductions - Ice Breaker & Opening Discussion	10 min.
What's Normal? What's Hard-To-Handle?	5 min.
Temperament Traits	5 min.
Break	10 min.
Strategies For Hard-To-Handle Behaviors	45 min.
Summary Activities	15 min.

Introduction - Ice Breaker Activity: Famous Duos

This activity will get participants up and moving and will initiate interaction among participants who have never met before. It is equally fun for groups of people who already know each other.

Pre-preparation: Write the names of famous duos on individual slips of paper. These might include Batman and Robin, Lone Ranger and Tonto, Scooby-Doo and Shaggy, Fred and Wilma Flintstone, Romeo and Juliet, etc. Mix up the names in an envelope.

Directions: Have each participant draw one slip of paper from the envelope. Tell them that the object of the game is to locate their partner. To do this they have to ask other participants close-ended questions (questions which can only be answered with a "yes" or "no") until they locate their partner. Questions may include things like "Do you wear tights?" or "Are you a cartoon character?". Tell participants that once they have located their partner, they should each interview the other. They should be prepared to introduce their partner to the rest of the group.

Introduction - Opening Discussion

For abused and neglected children, the nature of their experiences adversely influences the development of their brains.

At birth, the human brain is undeveloped. It is during childhood that the brain matures. With optimal experiences (loving touches, soft voices, appropriate visual stimuli) the brain develops healthy, flexible and diverse capabilities. When there is disruption of normal developmental experiences, however, there may be devastating impact.

Fortunately, there is hope. The brain is very "plastic" - meaning it is capable of changing. Although the brain is most plastic during early childhood, even older children can benefit from intervention (i.e. foster care). The most successful interventions are those that provide positive experiences that are repetitive, consistent, and predictable - a world most foster children have never known.

The positive discipline techniques that are effective with most children (perhaps even your own biological children), may not be as effective with a foster child. Because of their past experiences, you may be dealing with any number of problem behaviors (no prior discipline, emotional disturbances, using bad behavior to get the attention they were not given previously, etc.). Understanding what might be normal childhood behavior and what behaviors need to be addressed differently is the first step.

What's Normal? What's Hard-to-Handle?

How do most hard-to-handle children act? Outbursts of anger, arguing, disobedience, irritability, defiance, failing to accept responsibility for actions - all are common hard-to-handle behaviors.

[Discuss Overhead #1: "What's Normal? What's Hard-To- Handle"]

Temperament Traits

Most child development experts believe that our personalities are influenced by biological factors and we are born with certain behavioral tendencies. Some babies are born very active and emotionally intense. Others tend to be calm and low-key.

Temperament styles usually have an upside and a downside, depending on the circumstances. For example:

- Intense, active people are often movers and shakers; they're great at getting things done. On the other hand, these people can be hard to live with because they often respond too emotionally and forcefully.
- People who are easygoing may have the advantage of calm, smooth relationships, but they may be less driven to accomplish things on their own.

[Discuss Overhead #2a and #2b: "What's Your Child's Temperament?"]

Because these temperamental differences are noticed so early in life, it is believed they result from nature rather than nurture. However, nature alone doesn't account for actions. Our natural tendencies are strengthened or weakened by our experiences. The past experiences of a foster child will have greatly impacted the child's natural temperament. Instead of trying to work against the child's natural temperament, try to work with it - recognizing and enhancing the child's strengths and positive characteristics.

Strategies For Hard-To-Handle Behaviors

(List each strategy on a board or flipchart so participants can follow along and then refer back to them as needed.)

1. Stating Expectations

Stating expectations **clearly** is critical. Before giving your child instructions, eliminate distractions (TV, etc.) and get down on your child's level. Make eye contact and sometimes touching also helps your child focus. (Be cautious of touching if the foster child has been physically abused). Keep directions brief. Tell them what to do, instead of what **not** to do. Give directions as statements, not as questions. Don't say "Would you clear the table?" unless you are willing to accept the answer "no". Some foster children may not be used to receiving instructions so the child may need to be shown how to do a particular task. Ask your child to repeat the directions back to you so that you know the child understands what is expected. If your child doesn't follow a direction the first time, restate it while **calmly** explaining the consequences that will occur if the instruction is not followed. Then follow through with the consequence if necessary. Offer praise when the task has been completed. Remember to give feedback immediately, positively and consistently.

2. Time Out

Time out literally means a *time out* from any social feedback or rewards. It works best with disruptive behaviors, such as defiance, yelling, hitting, temper tantrums and destructiveness. Time out is usually not as effective for annoying behaviors like pouting, skipping a routine activity or doing chores. A major advantage of time out is that it doesn't feed into the negative emotion that's already there. It separates the child from the situation, it allows time for the child to calm down and eliminates the emotional rise between parent and child.

[Overhead #3: "Common Questions About Time Out" - Refer to the handout by the same title for discussion points]

3. Positive Social Feedback and Positive Concrete Feedback

When we express approval to children after they follow directions, we increase the likelihood that they will follow other directions in the future. Positive social feedback includes smiles, hugs and kind words. Some children seem to crave social feedback even when it's negative. For example, many difficult children interrupt while their parents are talking on the phone. When parents argue or fuss with the child, that attention is negative social feedback. Try rewarding children for a desired behavior instead. If your child lets you talk for a few minutes, thank the child for not interrupting.

For many hard-to-handle children, positive social feedback alone won't be enough. Some children need more stimulation (i.e., a stronger force) to respond. Stronger social reinforcements such as saying "Thank you very much for picking up your room" **in a louder voice and with more expression**, while providing concrete rewards like stickers or points toward a privilege may be needed. Positive concrete feedback can be in the form of tangible items or activities - such as a fancy pencil or hair barrette or extra play

time or a later bedtime. If you consistently pair positive social feedback and concrete rewards, you are more likely to see changes in the child's behavior.

How is a **reward** different from a **bribe**? A reward focuses on good behavior. A bribe focuses on bad behavior. A child gets a reward **after** he has behaved well or finished a task. For example, you might give a reward (extra playtime) to a child who has helped rake leaves. The reward reinforces the good behavior. A bribe is given **ahead of time** to stop misbehavior or to encourage a child to do something he has already refused to do. An example of a bribe would be giving candy to a child who has refused to clean up his room. Bribes teach a child that he can get what he wants by refusing to cooperate.

Use rewards instead of bribes and always pair rewards with hugs and verbal praise. Rewards do not have to be expensive and should not be given for everything your child does. Save rewards for special occasions and for extra hard work or especially good behavior. Rewards can be items such as a sticker or a pencil or simply drawing a smiley face on the calendar that day. Rewards can also be privileges such as extra playtime, having a friend over or going to a park.

4. Planned Ignoring

When behavior is annoying but not disruptive or destructive (i.e. whining) or when behavior is simply to get your attention, planned ignoring may be used. Say something like "you know it bothers me when you whine instead of asking for what you want, so when you whine, I'm not going to answer you". This tells children what you want them to stop doing: whining. It also tells children what they can do instead: ask for what they want. When children stop an annoying behavior, stop ignoring and start giving positive feedback.

5. Positive Practice

Let's say your daughter always drops her bookbag on the kitchen floor after school and nothing you have tried seems to work. Try positive practice. Have your daughter pick up the bookbag, go outside, come in the door, go through the kitchen, and take the bookbag to her bedroom. Then have her repeat the process again - five times. If your child refused to carry out the practice, give a more serious consequence such as an early bedtime.

6. Worse-Choice Approach

A method for handling arguments is by giving children worse choices when they try to negotiate. Suppose your son's weekday bedtime is 9:00 and he wants to stay up until 11:00 on weekends. You compromise and say he can go to bed at 10:00. But your son doesn't stop there; he keeps begging. When this happens, offer a worse choice: "you can go to bed at 10:00 or 8:30". When we give a worse choice, often the child will accept the original compromise.

7. Natural and Logical Consequences

Natural consequences are the direct result of a child's behavior. If the child does not wear a raincoat on a rainy day, he will get wet. If he doesn't put clothes in the laundry, those clothes don't get washed. The results can also be positive: if you get enough sleep, you will be well rested and more ready to tackle the day's challenges. The parent does not have to take action - the consequence occurred naturally.

Example: Your 12-year-old son feels it is dorky to wear a heavy jacket on a cold day. You've told him the weather report, but he still resists dressing warmly. If he doesn't get sick too easily, you might let nature take over rather than struggle. Let him make the choice and live with the consequence of his decision. Later it might occur to him that being cold is not cool.

Take advantage of times when natural consequences can do the teaching, since you need to choose your battles wisely with a difficult child.

Sometimes natural consequences are impractical or dangerous. Logical consequences should be reasonable, respectful to everyone involved (including you!) and discussed with your child in advance. For logical consequences to be effective, you must be willing to live with the choice your child makes.

Examples:

Your daughter knows when you eat dinner each night, but she doesn't join the family until 20 minutes later. To use a logical consequence, you could say "From now on, I'll call you once for dinner. If you are not here in five minutes, we'll start without you. If we are finished when you arrive, you can take care of your own dinner and clean up after yourself".

What if your son habitually misses the bus and you need to take him to school? As a logical consequence, charge a fare when you provide the transportation. If he doesn't have money, charge him time such as doing extra chores. Charge him with chores that will take him as long as it took you to take him to school.

For logical consequences to be effective, children need to see how the consequence is associated with the problem behavior. Let's say your son borrows your tools and leaves them out in the rain. One logical consequence would be to forbid the child from using your tools for a specified period of time. Cleaning out the garage would not be an appropriate logical consequence since cleaning the garage has little to do with responsible use of borrowed items.

Guidelines for Removing Objects or Privileges

1. Revoke a privilege for short time periods, such as a day or two. Negative consequences that go on too long lose their effectiveness.
2. Don't take away a privilege a child has already earned.

3. If your child already has one privilege removed and acts up in another way, remove a different privilege rather than adding to the length of the original privilege removal.

Feedback Guidelines for Different Ages

We need to change the methods of discipline we use as children grow older. Here are some guidelines for determining which feedback strategies work best for kids at different ages.

[Go to Overhead #4 for guidelines]

Point System

A home-economy program (or point system), which combines positive and negative feedback by making expectations and consequences clear, can be an effective way to give hard-to-handle kids the structure they need. When other methods you've tried don't work, a home-economy program can help you provide your child with incentives for positive behavior. The term *home-economy program* refers to any system in which individuals are *paid* for positive actions and *fined* for negative ones. This type of program is sometimes called a token system or point system.

Here's an example:

Step 1: Select the behaviors you want to address. Emphasize increasing positive behaviors rather than simply decreasing the negative ones. As a general rule of thumb: work on 2-3 times as many positive behaviors as negative ones. For children ages 6 and older, use points. For children younger than 6, use objects such as stickers or pennies instead of points.

Look at the sample chart (*overhead #5A*). Stacy is working on six behaviors - increasing four positive behaviors and decreasing two problem behaviors. Stacy earns points for completing the positive tasks and she loses points for engaging in negative behavior.

Step 2: Once you define the behaviors, you'll need to assign values to the behaviors. For children ages 6 and older, use points. For children younger than 6, use objects such as stickers or pennies instead of points. Decide how many points (or stickers) each behavior will be worth. Look again at the sample chart. You will notice that Stacy earns more points for doing her homework. Doing homework takes more sustained effort and mental energy, so it has a bigger reward.

Step 3: Once you set up your system for tracking behaviors and assigning points, you can determine what rewards your child can earn. The child earns points (or stickers) that she can trade for things she would like to have or do. Examples of rewards might include going to bed later, calling a friend on the phone, an extra story at bedtime, meal at a favorite restaurant, etc. After choosing the rewards, set a point value for each one.

Step 4: Start using the system! When your child engages in desirable behavior, award points as soon as possible. For negative behaviors, subtract points or take away tokens. At the end of each day, add and subtract points. Finally, reward the points. Let your child cash in on both short-term (daily) and long-term (weekly or monthly) rewards.

Summary: Group Activity

Have participants give examples of hard-to-handle behaviors that they have experienced. List each behavior on a board or flipchart. When you have 5-10 listed, have participants choose the top three (most common among the group) behaviors. Separate the participants into three small groups (3-6 per group). Give each group a sheet of flipchart paper and a color marker. Assign one of the three behaviors to each group and ask them to write that behavior at the top of the paper.

Explain that each group will have two minutes to brainstorm and record one strategy or technique to manage the behavior. Tell them that at the end of the time, you will signal them to stop and move on to the next behavior. *[Note: Either the participants or the papers can move. The sheets of paper can be taped around the room or placed on different tables and the groups of participants can move from "station to station". Alternatively, the groups can remain in permanent places and the sheets of paper can be passed counter-clockwise from group to group.]*

As groups brainstorm each behavior, they may list the same solution as the group before them or choose a different way to manage the behavior. Continue rotations until each group has had a chance to brainstorm each behavior. Read through the solutions and have participants discuss why and how they chose the strategy or technique.

Wrap-Up Activity

Pre-preparation: Put different sponge shapes into a plastic sand bucket. (Sponges can be purchased from Wal-Mart or craft store - you may use geometric shapes, animals, etc.)

Directions: Have participants choose a sponge from the bucket (if you have enough for everyone) or distribute the sponges to a few participants randomly. Each sponge represents a question for the participant to answer:

Circle - Which technique or strategy that was discussed today can you start using right away?

Square - What did you like best about today's session?

Triangle - Name a new idea you learned today.

Rectangle - Name one thing you will do differently as a result of today's session.

Heart - Name one parenting topic you would like to have more information on.

Sources:

"How to Handle a Hard-to-Handle Kid: A Parents Guide to Understanding and Changing Problem Behaviors", 1999 by C. Drew Edwards, Free Spirit Publishing Inc. Minneapolis

ISBN 1-57542-046-5

Transparency Masters Below

Overhead #1

What's Normal? What's Hard-to-Handle?

Handle	Normal Kids	Moderately Hard-to-Handle	Strongly Hard-to-
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# of Problems	A Few	Several	Many
Problems Occur	Infrequently	Frequently	Very Frequent
Intensity	Mild	Moderate	Strong
Where Problems Occur	In one place	More than one setting	Usually in many settings
Triggers	Stress and new challenges but lasts less than 6 months	Stress and new challenges and lasts 6 months or more	Stress and new challenges lasting 6 months to 1 year.
Professional Help Needed?	No	Not necessary, but could be helpful	Yes

Adapted from: "How To Handle A Hard-To-Handle Kid" by C. Drew Edwards

quite even. Your child usually
exaggerated.
displays feelings in a low-key manner

expressed and tend to be

1 - - - - -
- 5

Positive Outlook

Negative

Outlook

Your child tends to be upbeat,
complain, become
happy, content, and positive.
negative side of life.

Your child tends to
upset, and see the

1 - - - - -
5

Overhead #2b

Regular

Irregular

Your child tends to prefer a
to prefer
consistent daily schedule.
schedule.

Your child tends
a more varied

1 -----
5

Distractible

Persistent

Your child's attention can easily
long attention
be diverted to another activity
easy to break.

Your child has a
span that is not

1 -----
5

Adaptable

Embrace Change

Your child is outgoing, sociable,
cautious about new
and eager to try new things.
changes in routines.

Slow to

Your child is
situations and

1 -----
5

Extroverted

Introverted

Your child thrives on social contact.
is less outgoing
He or she is outgoing and enjoys group
playing alone.
activities more than playing alone.

Your child
and enjoys

1 -----

Common Questions About Time Out

Where should the time out area be located?

How long should time out last?

When should a child go to time out?

What if children refuse to go?

What should happen during time out?

What if children leave time out before it's over?

What if children mess up the time out area?

Adapted from: "How to Handle A Hard-To-Handle Kid" by C. Drew Edwards

Feedback Guidelines for Different Ages

Feedback Strategy

Most Effective Age

Time Out	3 - 10 years
Positive Social Feedback	3 - 12 years
Positive Concrete Feedback	3 - 12 years
Planned Ignoring	3 - 12 years
Positive Practice	5 - 10 years
Worse-Choice Approach	8 - 12 years
Natural Consequences	8 - 12 years
Logical Consequences	8 - 12 years

Adapted from: "How To Handle A Hard-To-Handle Kid" by C. Drew Edwards

Common Questions About Time-Out

Where should the time-out area be located? The time-out area should be away from normal household traffic so the child receives virtually no attention from anyone. The spare bedroom, living room, foyer, hall, or bottom step of a stairway are all possibilities. Make sure the time-out space is away from things the child could play with and that it doesn't have an interesting view. Avoid the child's bedroom, since children will find a lot to do there.

How long should time out last? Short periods are more effective than long ones. A useful guideline is one minute for every year of age through age 6. Then give a total of no more than 10 to 15 minutes for older children. For serious problems such as aggression, a longer period is justified - up to 30 minutes per infraction. If a time out lasts too long, however, the child may lose the connection between it and the problem behavior. Many children become even more emotional if they must spend a prolonged period in time out.

When should a child go to time out? For physically aggressive and destructive behaviors, time out needs to be immediate. "You hit your brother. That's a time out now." For other disruptive behaviors, give a verbal reprimand first. "I don't like to hear that yelling. Please stop or you'll go to time out." If your child yells again, immediately move toward your child (without charging like a rhino) and firmly guide your child to the time-out area. Don't fuss, yell, or keep telling your child to go to time out. As you move toward your child, you can briefly acknowledge your child's anger but don't discuss it any further.

What if children refuse to go? Some children, especially preschoolers, need to be carried or physically assisted to a time out. If this requires great physical force, however, it may do more harm than good. By age 9 or 10, many children can put up a big fight. If your child can physically overpower you, your child may end up feeling frightened and guilty while you may experience strong anger, embarrassment, and fear. In these cases, fine your child or add two minutes to the time out for every minute your child delays going. Or you could

say, "For every minute you delay going to your time out, that's 10 minutes off your TV time."

What should happen during time out? Don't talk to your child. Don't look at your child. Don't respond if your child complains or calls out to you. Hard-to-handle children may cry, complain, and yell during time out. Some won't even sit. That's okay - - the purpose of time out is to stop the problem behavior and take away positive social reinforcement. As long as children stay in the time-out area, it's okay.

Before leaving time out, your child must be calm for 20 to 30 seconds. If your daughter is crying at the end of time out, say, "When you're quiet for a bit, you can leave time out." Then walk away. If he continues to cry, return every few minutes and repeat the statement. Once she's calm, time out is over. Calm doesn't mean absolute quiet. Some remnants of sniffing and whimpering are okay.

As your child leaves time out, briefly remind him or her of the reason for it. "Remember, whenever you hit someone, you go to time out," Later, when your child is more settled, you can talk about alternative ways your child could have acted instead of hitting.

What if children leave time out before it's over? Often hard-to-handle children refuse to remain in time out. Some even run every time you try to return them there. You can try a number of different things:

- For every minute your child leaves time out, take away five minutes of television time.
- Return your child to time out every time he or she leaves. Do this as firmly and as calmly as possible, and as many times as necessary. Carry your child, if that works, but don't talk with your child.
- Increase time out by two minutes for every minute your child leaves, up to 20 minutes. Say, "You've been out of time out for one minute, so that's now 12 minutes instead of 10." If your child still leaves, one minute later say, "You've been out another minute. Now your time out is 14 minutes."

What if children mess up the time-out area? If children make a mess, they must help straighten it up. If they refuse, charge a fine in the form of money, objects, time or privileges. If children destroy some of their own belongings,

don't replace them. If they damage someone else's stuff, use the overcorrection method - a form of restitution where children try to undo the effects of their behavior by making the situation better than it was before they disrupted it. For example, if your 8-year-old threw food on the floor, she'd need to clean up her mess and also mop the entire kitchen. If your 11-year-old broke something that belongs to someone else, he'd need to replace it with an object of greater value.

Adapted from: "How To Handle A Hard-To-Handle Kid" by C. Drew Edwards.