

Last updated 5/16/2021

**NTDC Right Time Training
RESPONDING TO CHILDREN IN CRISIS
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Question 1: What does it mean to ensure that children feel physically and psychologically safe?

We usually think of safety as being free from abuse and neglect. However, we need to expand our definition to include the feelings of psychological or emotional safety. Most of us usually feel safe without really thinking about it. When we feel emotionally safe, we are relaxed and can let our guard down. When children feel safe, they are more likely to believe that other persons have their best interests in mind and understand them for who they are. This assurance and acceptance help children to feel comfortable with themselves and to develop relationships with others more easily.

A child's ability to feel safe in the world changes when the child has experienced trauma, separation or loss. Children who have had these painful experiences are often "on alert," watching for any sign of danger so that they can avoid emotional or physical pain. When these children feel unsafe, their bodies have physical reactions, such as the heart beating faster, plus feelings that the body is frozen in place and that the mind is on the verge of panic.¹ Children who do not feel safe can be very sensitive even to small changes in schedules and transitions. For these children, surprises, chaotic social situations and practically any new situation can be scary and upsetting. These feelings of being unsafe can last long after a child has been removed from real physical danger.

As a result, it is critical for parents who are fostering or adopting to organize their homes so that the child's home life is consistent and predictable. Once the child gains a sense of security and safety, the feeling of being safe is likely to lead the child to become more trusting and better able to build a relationship with the parents who are fostering or adopting.

Question 2: What are some practical ways to make children feel physically and psychologically safe?

At every age there are things that help us to feel safe. For a younger child, the sense of safety might come through having a pacifier, a special blanket, a stuffed toy or sucking a thumb. A young child also can get a sense of safety from a loving caregiver, a kind word, a smile, a hug or the sensation of rocking back and forth. As we grow older, we seek the feeling of safety from

¹ Preisler, Jeanne. (May 2013) Being Safe vs. Feeling Safe [Electronic version]. *Fostering Perspectives*, 17, 2. <http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv17n2/psychological-safety.html>

other things or experiences such as a friendly voice, a comfy pillow, a special meal, a special place or time spent with friends. We also can seek safety in ways that are not good for us, such as eating too much or using alcohol or drugs to dull our feelings.

Children who have experienced trauma, separation or loss might get a sense of safety from things we hardly ever would consider. Children who have experienced neglect or extreme poverty might gain a sense of safety from knowing that now food is available at all times. The temperature in a room might help a child to feel safe. Sometimes what we think will help a child to feel safe will have the opposite effect. For a child who has experienced physical abuse, a hug or a hot bath might cause that child to feel unsafe. Certain sights, sounds or smells can be triggers that bring up scary feelings.

When a child's feelings are triggered, the child might understand what triggered those feelings. More often though, children are not aware of the connection between a trigger (for example, the smell of a cigar) and the scary feelings that seem to come up suddenly. This means that parents need to become good detectives to help a child whom they are fostering or adopting identify the child's own triggers and what will help the child to feel safe.² The parents need to feel comfortable talking with the child about which things might be triggers and asking what things the child really likes or that make the child feel safe. After parents have learned which things help the child to feel safe, they can find ways to include those things in their home and in the child's daily routine.

Here are examples of matters that you need to consider to ensure that a child whom you are fostering or adopting feels physically and psychologically safe in your home:

- Ask what makes the child feel comfortable while sleeping. For example, the child might want to sleep with a light on or while listening to music in the background. Having a weighted blanket that gently hugs the child might make the child feel safe and secure at night.
- Make sure the child knows the house rules and that there are clear boundaries about privacy and physical contact.
- Let the child know how to get hold of you if the child needs you during the night.
- Set predictable and consistent routines.
- Make sure your household schedule is not hectic. Some children who have experienced trauma, separation or loss have difficulties with sudden changes in schedules, a lot of noise or chaos in a household and large group gatherings.
- Be flexible and willing to adjust your family's routines and activities to ensure that you are not doing something that makes the child feel unsafe.
- Have regular conversations with the child about safety and what safety means in your house.

² [Ibid](#)

Question 3: What are behavioral triggers, and how do you identify them for a child whom you are fostering or adopting?

A **trigger** is a reaction in the present to something traumatic that happened in the past. A traumatic event can be physically or psychologically painful. A trigger can be anything that reminds the child of the traumatic event, such as a smell, a sound, a type of food or a time of the year. When a child is “triggered” in the present by this reminder of the traumatic event, the child can have the same thoughts and feelings that the child experienced during the original event and can relive the pain of that event. A trigger can cause a child to feel pain, anxiety or sadness.

You sometimes can observe changes in a child’s behavior that tell you the child is being triggered. If you notice these changes early enough, you may be able to prevent the child’s behavior from getting worse (that is, **escalating**). You can identify what acts as a trigger for the child you are fostering or adopting by paying attention and looking for patterns. For example, if you notice that the child is more irritable than usual, the child might be getting triggered by something. You might want to keep a journal or a calendar in which you make notes about what was happening just before the child’s behaviors started to worsen. This record will help you to find patterns and to look for connections. After you have a better idea of the child’s triggers, you can devise ways to reduce triggers in the child’s environment (as much as possible) and to reduce the intensity of the triggers’ impacts on the child. It is important for you to remember that children usually are not aware of their own triggers.

Question 4: What are ways to intervene when the child I am fostering or adopting becomes triggered or reactive?

- Start by understanding the specific history and needs of the child in the child’s previous home. This can help you to set expectations appropriate for the child’s level of ability. Parents who learn and understand the process of a child’s brain development and the impact that trauma has on how children develop, think and function usually are able to stay calm in the face of negative behaviors exhibited by the child they are fostering or adopting. Researching to learn more about thoughtful ways to respond to a child’s particular trauma triggers is necessary to understand what the child is experiencing when triggered.
- A child’s behaviors can be triggered by sights, sounds, smells or interactions that bring up reminders of past trauma so powerful that the child feels as though reliving the original trauma. It is easier to prevent a trigger than to manage a child already triggered. Most children will not know what triggers their behaviors; they will need your help identifying their triggers. Triggers can be sudden memories (flashbacks), reminders of past trauma or the inability to manage “big” feelings. Shame is a negative reflection of how a person feels about oneself. An adult showing or expressing disappointment in a child might be a trigger for the child to feel immense shame. Children might fear losing face in front of others or might act out the frustration they feel because they do not understand what is expected of

them. When children are not feeling well physically, they are more likely to become triggered because being unwell lowers their ability to manage stress. Feeling unwell can be related to lack of sleep, lack of good nutrition, headaches from eyestrain if the child needs glasses, not drinking enough water or other health issues.

- Once you have a better idea of the child's triggers, you and the child can work together to create a plan of action to avoid triggers and to decide what to do to restore calm if the child becomes triggered. To make sure the plan of action will be ready when problems occur, it's important to practice the calming plans and techniques outside of a stressful event, when the child is calm and regulated. Talk openly with the child; let the child that know you want to be there to give support when the child is triggered. Letting the child know of your own triggers and how you respond to them is another way of showing that you understand the child's feelings and that the child is not alone. If the child is used to knowing that you are available for support and knows what this support is like, then the child might be more likely to accept your support. Practice calming techniques with the child by doing deep breathing together or coming up with code words or signal words that will give the child a way to ask for your help when triggered without alerting others.

Question 5: Which basic strategies can a parent who is fostering or adopting use to prevent a child's behaviors from escalating?

You can follow these few steps to prevent a child's behavior from escalating to a level of crisis:

First, learn to recognize the triggers that "set off" the child's problem behaviors. A trigger is a reaction in the present to something traumatic that happened in the past. A trigger can be anything that reminds the child of the traumatic event, such as a smell, a song, a type of food or a time of the year. When the child is "triggered" in the present by this reminder of the traumatic event, the child can have the same thoughts and feelings that the child experienced during the original event and can relive the pain of that event. Knowing the child's triggers can help you to prevent and to manage challenging behaviors. Try to identify the child's triggers, such as transitioning from school to home, eating certain foods, being around particular smells or transitioning to bedtime. After you know the child's triggers, try as much as possible to manage the child's home and school environments to reduce the incidence of those triggers. Because the child likely will not be aware of the child's own triggers, you will need to tell the child that you realize something is troubling and making the child feel upset. Use whatever words describe how the child might be feeling that you know the child will understand.

Second, when the child is becoming upset, keep yourself calm. Focus your response on the child's feelings, not on the behaviors. Keep your voice calm and soothing and your body language open and relaxed. For example, closed body language includes clenching the hands into fists or crossing your arms across your chest. Open body language includes keeping your palms open and your arms at your sides. Take a few moments to calm yourself before you attempt to respond to the child. If you need to step away for a minute to regulate yourself, let

the child know that you need to take a few minutes to get yourself calm. It is important that you know your own triggers (such as the way you were parented, your culture, your beliefs) and how your life's experiences might influence the way that you respond to the child. For example, some of the most common triggers for parents involve the child not being respectful, not following directions, or being loud and disruptive in public.

Last, when the child is getting upset, make sure that you don't overreact. Remain as calm as you can. If you show the child an extreme response, the child's behavior is likely to escalate out of control, possibly to the point of a meltdown. Even if the child's behavior is upsetting you, try to control your response.

Here are strategies you can use to prevent a child's behavior from escalating:

- Listen to the child. Don't argue or try to reason with the child while the child is upset.
- Express that you care about the child feeling upset, and ask how you can help.
- You can offer ideas to the child (for example, "Would you like to..." or "What about..."), but try not to take control.
- Be careful to avoid too much eye contact.
- Keep your vocal tone low and soft.
- Because physical contact sometimes can be a trigger for a child, don't try to hug or to embrace the child physically.
- Keep the stimulation level low for the child. For example, lower the lights; turn off sources of loud sounds such as the television, radio or vacuum cleaner; and instruct other children in the home to go to another room.
- Give the child enough physical space so that the child doesn't feel cornered or trapped.

When the child already is escalated, don't try to talk a lot. Just listen to the child; then respond with brief answers. If the child continues to escalate further, focus on trying to keep the child safe. You will need to be patient while the child starts to de-escalate.

Question 6: Why is it critical for parents who are fostering or adopting to control their reaction before they respond to a child who is escalated?

When the child's behaviors worsen or start to escalate, you need to be willing to step back, to take a deep breath and to get yourself calm before responding to the child. Otherwise, your reaction to the child and the situation could cause further escalation. When you take a step back and pause for a moment before reacting, you will be able to focus better on what is causing the child's behaviors rather than just to react to the negative behaviors. This "breathing room" will give you time to respond in a calm way that will be more helpful for you and the child. This is not the time for you to dig in your heels because of an "I am right" or "I'm in charge" attitude. You need to stay *regulated* (in other words, to stay calm) so that you can help the child to become regulated as well. Don't be in a rush to solve problems when the child's

behavior is still escalated. Instead, take the lead in helping the child to calm down. Later, when you are both calm, you can talk with the child about what happened.

As you continue to respond in a mild manner, the child will become calm and relaxed. This is called co-regulating. Co-regulation is usually learned by infants from their parents. When a baby has a need and cries out, a parent takes care of the need and soothes the baby by singing, talking, rocking, walking and so forth. Some children do not learn co-regulation early in life, especially those who have experienced trauma, separation, neglect or loss. Children who have experienced different types of trauma might not know how to regulate their bodies and emotions when they become upset. Parents who are fostering or adopting can help to teach a child how to regulate emotions by staying calm when the child becomes upset and making sure that the child's basic needs, such as safety, are met while the child is feeling upset.

Question 7: What can parents who are fostering or adopting do to manage their own reactions when a child becomes upset?

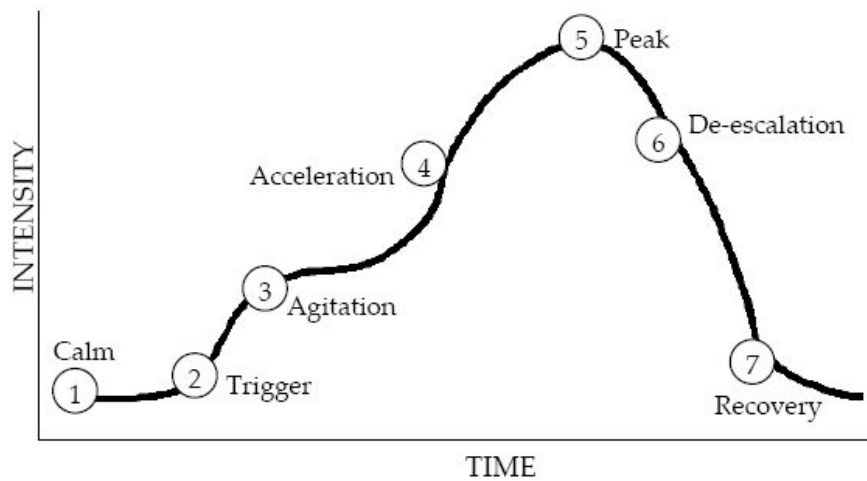
You can take steps ahead of time to help you stay calm in the event that the child's negative behaviors worsen or escalate.

First, identify your own triggers that cause you to become agitated, irritated or upset. Some of the most common triggers for parents involve a child not being respectful, not following directions, or being loud and disruptive in public. A parent also can become triggered when the parent feels misunderstood or is trying to deal with too many new challenges.

Next, think about what *need* is behind the child's behavior. This step will help you to remember that the child is not performing the behavior on purpose and that the behavior is not about you personally, even if the child is directing anger at you because you are a "safe target." Prepare yourself by learning what works for you to calm yourself down. Perhaps this could be turning down the volume of a television that's too loud or taking a few minutes to step outside to take a deep breath and to clear your head.

It is critical that you learn to pause and to think before you react to a child's behavior. This will help you to feel calmer and more in control of your own emotions. If you find yourself starting to lose control, you might say to the child, "I'm going to step out of the room for a minute because I don't want to do or to say something I don't mean. I'll be back as soon as I am calm again." Remember that if you are hungry, tired, stressed or overworked, you won't be able to calm yourself down as easily. Therefore, you need to get enough sleep, to eat well, and to take time for doing activities that you enjoy. All of these are examples of self-care. Self-care is extremely important for you as a parent who is fostering or adopting so that you will have the energy, ability and internal resources to respond to challenging situations in a calm, relaxed manner.

Question 8: What are the phases of a crisis?



The first phase of a crisis is the **trigger phase**. Triggering happens when a child has a negative experience or when something happens that embarrasses, shames, frustrates or scares the child. Usually, the initial feelings of the triggering phase are followed quickly by agitation and anger which can lead to acceleration.

In the **Acceleration** phase (also referred to as escalation) the child is very upset and starts to lose control of behavior. The child might begin yelling, swearing, demanding, making verbal threats or using threatening gestures.

As the situation progresses, the child enters the **peak** or crisis phase. In this phase, the child is not able to understand clearly what is happening around the child. At this peak of emotion, the child cannot solve problems, cannot express the feelings that the child is experiencing and cannot control behavior. The child might start to become verbally or physically aggressive toward others (for example, screaming, throwing objects or hitting) or might exhibit self-harming behaviors (for example, head banging or hair pulling).

After going through the peak phase, the child will start to de-escalate and will enter the **recovery** phase. In this phase the child begins to calm down and starts to get behavior under control again. You might notice the child's voice lowering. During recovery, the child will start to relate to you more clearly and normally and will begin to relax. After becoming calm again, some children might feel sorry for their behavioral outbursts and might try to apologize for what they said or did while they were upset. However, other children might feel upset or embarrassed by their behavior and simply might want to be left alone.³ During the recovery phase, children often are physically tired; many children need to sleep or need time to recover emotionally in the aftermath of the crisis. The recovery phase also is a time of opportunity for a

³ Neal, Dale A., Barnhart, Deborah A., & Sample, Marilyn H. *NURS 106 Ment Hlth Asp Nurs Pract*. Indiana State University. Retrieved May 16, 2021 from <https://www.coursehero.com/file/10266502/Aggression-Notes/>

child to learn from the crisis ways to handle a similar situation in a different way in the future. This includes learning what the child’s triggers are, how to control responses to these triggers and how to regulate emotions.

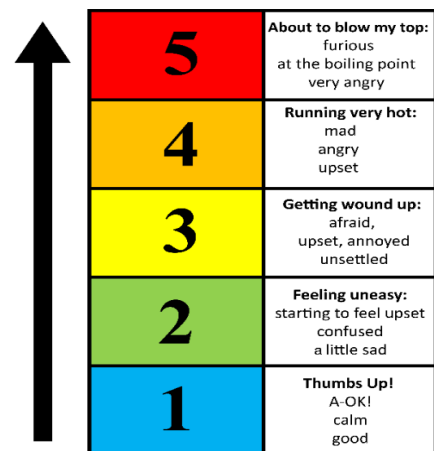
Question 9: What are some behaviors of a child who has escalated to a full crisis state?

When a child has escalated to a full crisis state, you probably will see the child express anger. The child likely will show more confrontational and aggressive behavior such as screaming, shouting, swearing or threatening you or others. The child might make verbal threats or use abusive language and might assume a threatening posture such as raising fists. The child might hit, punch or slap peers or adults. Some children in a full crisis state damage property by punching walls or throwing things. In this phase, a child is no longer able to understand clearly what is happening around the child. At this peak of emotion, the child cannot solve problems, cannot express the feelings that the child is experiencing and cannot control behavior. During the full crisis period, you need to stay calm. Don’t engage in the confrontation. Keep physical distance between you and the child. Stay present, but mostly quiet. You can give brief answers to the child’s questions; but this is not a teachable moment, nor is it the right time to reason with the child or to talk about the consequences of the child’s negative behavior. You need to give the child physical and emotional space. If the child is receiving counseling, you need to notify the case manager when the child goes into a full crisis state. The child might need additional help from professionals to learn how to control emotions and to prevent escalating into a crisis.

Question 10: What can a parent who is fostering or adopting a child do during the recovery phase to help the child learn from the crisis experience?

In the recovery phase, the child has calmed down and has regained control of behavior. At this point, you can help the child to think about what happened and to come up with ideas for reacting in a better way when a similar situation arises in the future. While talking with the child in the recovery phase, stay positive and focused on preventing a future crisis. Discuss what happened with the child, and try together to figure out what triggered the child’s behavior. Remember to stay calm, even when talking about the child’s aggressive behaviors. You can help the child to write a plan for how to respond to a trigger in a different way in the future. Help the child to decide if the child needs to learn a new way to manage difficult emotions. For example, if the child has a hard time recognizing anger building up inside, you might introduce the child to an “anger meter.” Using this tool can help the child to notice when the child is

Graphic 1



becoming angry and getting more and more angry. An example of an anger meter is in Graphic 1 and in the resource section of this theme. In addition, you can teach the child ways to calm down, such as taking a walk or using deep breathing.

When talking with the child during the recovery phase, you need to be supportive and positive. Rather than punishing current behaviors, focus on helping the child to learn how to change the course of behavior the next time that the child's emotions are triggered. This does not mean that there should be no consequences for the child's negative behavior. For example, instead of letting the child watch a movie the same night as the crisis, you might instruct the child to clean up the room that the child destroyed during the crisis outburst. Alternatively, you might direct the child to perform extra chores around the house to pay for something broken during the crisis.