

# RESPONDING TO CHILDREN IN CRISIS RIGHT TIME VIDEO

## Key Points

### General Information:

- Being a foster or adoptive parent has many joys, but it is not always easy. At some point, parents may experience challenges and even crises.
- Crises can be a real opportunity for children, parents, and families to grow.

### Part I: The Science of a Crisis

- There are different definitions of a crisis, but typically they can be described as moments when adults must do something to intervene with a child.
- Understanding how the body responds to a perceived threat or danger is an essential part of managing a crisis:
  - Fight, flight, and freeze are natural responses that alert human beings to a potential danger;
  - For children who have not had their needs met, or not met consistently, their brains and bodies became flooded with stress, yet the caregiver was not there to help them relax.
  - When we sense threat, our bodies react with the “fight, flight or freeze” response- evident through physical effects like a rapid heart rate and/or breathing; and
  - When a parent helps a child calm, they are teaching the child’s stress response how to calm itself down, which helps the child learn how to stay relaxed and;
- When children have not learned how to relax and have learned their needs will not be met, it does not take much to activate their fight, flight or freeze responses.
- When children are in this state, they struggle to think, control their emotions, and react appropriately to what actually is happening.

### Part 2: Four Phases of a Crisis

- Without strategic interventions, explosive behaviors can lead to crisis.
- Understanding triggers can prevent a crisis from happening.
- The four phases of a crisis include:

1) Triggering

- a. A trigger can be an internal or external event.
- b. The trigger reminds the child of an emotion they've had before.
- c. Sometimes the trigger is obvious and sometimes it's a complete mystery.
- d. It's helpful to track or journal things that happened before a crisis to give clues.
- e. It can also be helpful to consult with people who know the child's history to understand the triggers (for example, birth families or a former foster parent).

2) Escalation

- a. When the child's body moves into a flight, fight, or freeze response, or "dysregulated state", it makes it difficult for their brain to reason.
- b. The escalation may be short-lived, but longer periods of escalation gives the caregiver time to intervene and change the course.
- c. The goal during this phase is to help the child move back to a "regulated" or relaxed state.
- d. Keep the child and the environment around them safe. (If you can't move the child, you can move the others present.)
- e. During this phase, it's important for the caregiver to stay as calm and regulated as possible:
  - o Use a calm voice and only say a few words
  - o If it's safe, it can be helpful to sit down and get closer to the child's level
  - o Try to keep your body language looking relaxed and open
  - o You might try using objects that can distract the child, like holding a small ball or object they might like or feel comforted by

3) Crisis

- a. During this phase, the most important thing a parent can do is provide "co-regulation". Co-regulation means helping the child to calm by remaining calm themselves. Co-regulation "lends" the calm of the parent to the child.
- b. Consequences and punishments do not work in this phase and may make things worse.
- c. A child cannot think clearly in this phase and it will not be effective to try reasoning with them.
- d. Focus on the child's feelings, not the behaviors.
- e. Remember QTIP (Quit Taking It Personally) - you cannot be effective in helping the child become calm if you make it about you.
- f. The role of the parent in this phase is to just be there for the child as a soothing presence.

#### 4) Recovery

- a. This can be one of the most important times because it can provide a time for learning and open connections between the child and the caregiver.
- b. It may be a time when the child allows the parent to get closer than they usually allow. When this opportunity presents itself, the parent can show love and the child can often receive their love.
- c. It may be a time for physical connection.
- d. It is now the time to reason and reflect on what happened.
- e. This can be an opportunity not just for the child to grow, but the parent as well. The parent and child can reflect on what the parent did that was or was not helpful for the child.

### **Part 3: How to Manage an Acute Crisis**

- If the crisis becomes too much to handle on your own, you may need to seek help from medical or mental health professionals and/or law enforcement.
- If the answer to all of these questions is ‘no’, then you likely need to call for immediate help, such as the police:
  - 1) Can I keep my child safe?
  - 2) Can I keep myself safe?
  - 3) Can I keep the other people in my home safe?
- A Crisis/Safety Plan can be helpful to managing a crisis that you cannot handle on your own.
  - This should be in place *before* any crisis situations happen and thought out carefully.
  - Creating a list of people who can help is an essential part of the plan (such as a neighbor, friend, family member).
  - Make sure that people you ask for help are clear on what they are to do and what the child will need from them in these times (for example, practicing breathing with the child).
- If the crisis is severe (such as a suicide attempt), hospitalization or residential care may be needed. If this is needed, show the child they are still loved and part of the family.

### **Part 4: Strategies to Prevent a Crisis from Escalating**

- 1) Create routines for safety and predictability on a daily basis.
- 2) Prepare children for new environments and experiences.
- 3) Make sure the child’s physical and psychological needs are met at the first sign of distress (You can use Dr. Daniel Siegel’s HALT tool: are they Hungry/Angry/Lonely/Tired?).
- 4) Use distractions, like changing environments or acting silly, when you notice things starting to get out of hand.
- 5) Model self-regulation/keep yourself calm-children will mirror and learn from your behavior.