
Aspiranet

~ January 2020 ~

Monthly Training

Dealing with Disrespectful Behavior

Most parents would agree that disrespectful behavior is one of the most difficult behaviors to deal with from children and youth. It “pushes buttons” and leads many parents to struggle to remain calm and not respond with anger. And rightfully so – disrespectful behavior is not OK.

It can be helpful to keep in mind that developmentally some level of “push back” against rules, limits and parents in general is a normal part of development. And for teens in particular, it’s a difficult time in their lives, biologically as well as socially, and this is especially true for teens in foster care. It’s a scary and uncertain time; because of that teens will often act out. For a teens in foster care, the acting out can be extreme. And as we’ve mentioned many times previously, children and youth in foster care come into care with trauma resulting in difficulty with trusting adults, “fight or flight” responses, and a general sense of uncertainty in their lives.

The following are suggestions you may or may not have tried during episodes of disrespectful behavior. Keep in mind the goal is to address the behavior without threatening, power struggling, or responding with disrespect. It may take multiple attempts using these suggestions to see results.

- **Stay calm:** Yes, much easier said than done. But responding with disrespect will send the wrong message, and getting into a power struggle will only escalate the situation. Instead, model good self care by taking some deep, slow breaths, counting to 20 or repeating a mantra such as, *“this is not an emergency”* or *“I can do this”* before you respond to your child/youth.
- **Decode the Behavior:** Remember behavior is communication. Try to look at things from your child/youth’s perspective. Were they caught off guard? Could they be experiencing a trauma reminder? Do they feel powerless? Their response is a reflection of what they are feeling inside. Unfortunately, at this point, they can’t put it into more appropriate words.
- **Empathize:** Help your child/youth understand their own feelings by offering an empathetic response, such as, *“I can see you’re really mad right now”* or *“Seems like you might be feeling caught off guard”*. You do not have to agree with the feeling, it simply means that you are willing to relate to their experience.
- **Consider biological needs and environmental influence:** Some kids are affected by low blood sugar, hunger or thirst. Also consider if too much environmental stimulation or not getting enough sleep impacts your child/youth. Has it been awhile since your child ate?

Could they use some water? Or a break from a loud environment? Perhaps offer in a non-threatening way, *“I’m going to have an apple, would you like one too?”* or *“I’m going out for some air, do you want to go?”*

- **Slow It Down:** It’s easy to get pulled into another’s angry, frustrated words and emotions. Instead of joining in and responding to every criticism or complaint thrown at you, try to redirect, *“Whoa! That’s a lot of info. I’d like to listen, but I’m having trouble following. Let’s slow down a bit, so I can better understand what you’re trying to say.”*
- **Connect:** When a child/youth is behaving disrespectfully, probably the last thing on your mind is trying to connect. However, for many children/youth, connection is exactly what they need. It can require digging deep, but if you are able, try to look past the behavior and put aside the big feelings and overwhelming emotion, to help you see that underneath it all, your child/youth is hurting and needs support. Sometimes an offer for a hug is better than a verbal response.

Time for Teaching

You may be thinking, as parents, it’s our job to teach children how to treat others with kindness, and how to communicate without being disrespectful. This is true, unfortunately, it is not possible to teach them to be respectful once they are already escalated and upset.

This is because, once your child or teen becomes angry or frustrated, the thinking part of their brain has *shut down*. They move into survival mode, with their body is flooded with stress hormones, and unable to hear or process what you’re saying.

In addition, if you are triggered by their disrespectful behavior, your brain goes into survival mode too, and your body is also flooded with stress hormones. As a result, you will also not be able to think rationally. You may react with anger, yelling and threats or you may shut down and feel like giving up.

Wait for Calm:

Waiting or delaying addressing the behavior does not mean that you are a “push over” parent or you’re saying that disrespectful behavior is OK. It means that you are waiting for your brain, and your child/youth’s brain, to get back to calm.

Once you and your child/youth are calm, use the opportunity to talk about what happened and how to do it differently next time.

- When you’re both ready to talk, you can say for example, *“It seems like having to complete your chores really upset you yesterday. Can we think of a different way to tell me how you feel?”*
- You can also address some of the things that were said, such as, *“I heard you mention feeling overwhelmed. Is this something you want to talk about now?”*

- If you responded with angry words or yelling during an episode of your child/youth's disrespectful behavior, it's important to acknowledge it and apologize. Keep in mind we can't teach our kids to be respectful by treating them with disrespect. It's a great opportunity to model that everyone makes mistakes and how we deal with the mistake that is important.
- And remember your feelings too! It's ok to express them, and let your child/teen know how their words affect you. Just keep the focus on how you felt and stay away from pointing the finger back at your child. You could say something such as, "I felt hurt when you said I was the meanest person ever".
- Please also remember it's *always* OK to contact your Aspiranet Social Worker or the On Call Social Worker for support and assistance to help get back to calm and feel better prepared to manage an escalated situation.

Adapted from "How to Respond When Your Child is Disrespectful" by Nicole Schwarz at www.imperfectfamilies.com

My signature below indicates that I have completed the January 2020 training “Dealing with Disrespectful Behavior”

Signature Foster Parent #1

Date

Print Name Foster Parent #1

Signature Foster Parent #2

Date

Print Name Foster Parent #2

Aspiranet Authorized Signature

Date

Training credit: ____ minutes

