

# Self-Study Course

## Caring for the Aggressive Child in Foster Care

June 1998

4.0 Hours Credit

This self-study is based on the following sources:

**Coping with Angry, Acting Out Children** The Family Forum Library, The Bureau for At Risk Youth, New York, 1992

**Dealing with Anger and Aggression** INFORMATION PACKET Alaska Center for Resource Families, Fairbanks, Alaska

***“Empathy, Impulse Control and Anger Management Research”*** Committee for Children, Seattle Washington

**Understanding the Regulations: What Alaskan Foster Parents Needs To Know: Positive Parenting and Behavior Management** Alaska Center for Resource Families, Fairbanks, Alaska

***“Understanding Violent Behavior in Children and Adolescents”*** American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 1997

**Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook For Child Care Providers** Boys Town Press, Boys Town, Nebraska, 1989



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### **FOSTER PARENT COMPETENCIES**

- 914-6 The foster caregiver knows how to assess a child’s problematic behaviors and how to determine which of these behaviors should be addressed immediately, which should wait, and which should be ignored.
- 914-7 The foster caregiver knows non-physical methods of behavior management, such as positive or selective reinforcement, time out, shaping of behavior, use of natural and logical consequences, and token economy, and knows how to choose the best method considering the child or youth, and the situation.
- 914-8 The foster caregiver knows agency-approved methods of physical restraint, and when and how to utilize them.
- 921-4 The foster caregiver knows possible reasons a child or youth might lie, steal, or exhibit destructive behavior, and knows effective strategies to deal with these problems.



## **CARING FOR THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD** **IN FOSTER CARE**

### ***Part One: Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Children***

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*When Charlie's foster mother says he can't extend his curfew another hour, he turns red and gets angry. He moves in close and clenches his fists. "You better let me stay out as long as I want or you'll be sorry!"*

*When five-year-old Chrissy get angry, she starts screaming and throws herself on the ground kicking. Her foster father remarked, "I would expect that from a two-year-old, but it's frightening in a girl as big as Chrissy."*

Children who come into foster care can show behaviors that are aggressive, anti-social and downright obnoxious. Aggressive behaviors are extremely challenging for a foster family. They can also interfere with a child's ability to function in relationships. This self-study will give you information to help children learn better social skills and to prevent aggressive behaviors from escalating into violence.

#### ***Why Are Children Aggressive?***

Aggressiveness includes hitting, verbal abuse, fighting, and destroying property. They can also include antisocial activities such as lying, noncompliance, negativism and stealing. Aggression itself is not abnormal. Many aggressive behaviors emerge during normal child development. For example, two-year-olds often have tantrums and are aggressive toward other children through biting and hitting. Four-years-olds tend to tell stories and falsehoods; older children learn to tell lies to avoid punishment. Some aggressive qualities are seen as a sign of strength in adults because of cultural values. These include having "machismo", being a warrior, or joining the military.

Aggressive behavior tends to diminish in children as a result of socialization and parenting. Culture and family values usually puts limits on aggression and children adapt their behavior to what is acceptable. In children where aggression does not diminish, these patterns can cause serious problems.

Why might a child continue to be aggressive during childhood and into adulthood? One theory says that a child's family or environment may encourage or allow aggression to continue. Some children learn aggressive behavior by watching family members, such as in cases of children who see their parents hit and hurt each other. For some children, their family (or a peer group such as a gang) may actively reward or promote aggression towards others outside of the group. Some children are more impulsive or lack of self-control as a result of temperament, drug and alcohol effects, or attention deficit disorder. Older children may be abusing alcohol and drugs. Some children may have psychiatric disorders that may put them at risk for violence or delusions. Other theories propose that in the genetic makeup of some people is a tendency toward aggression and violence.

## ***How Does Poor Parenting Contribute To Aggressiveness?***

One theory proposed by behaviorist Gerald Patterson and used as a model for Boys Town in Nebraska suggests that most aggressive behavior in children is continued through poor boundaries and ineffective parenting. Aggression emerges during normal childhood development. When parents respond to aggression with limits and boundaries, children must learn to meet their needs through appropriate ways. Aggressive behavior diminishes because it does not work or results in negative consequences. When aggression is rewarded or is not addressed, it can continue or even escalate.

### **EXAMPLE: *Buck***

*Buck knows that if he throws a tantrum and yells back at his parents that they often give into his demands. Sometimes his father will spank him if he feels Buck has gone too far. When his parents try to set some limits, he escalates even more. He has started throwing things when he gets angry. His mother alternates between pleading with him to “be a nice boy” and throwing up her hands in defeat. His father spends more and more time away from home, because he doesn’t know how to handle Buck anymore. Things get out of control quite easily. In addition, Buck is showing the same behavior at school. He has been put on detention twice already for fighting on the playground, and his teacher is counting the days to the end of school. Buck’s only friend is an older boy in the neighborhood who has already been in trouble with the law for stealing a bike and doing vandalism to a shed behind the school.*

Aggression wraps children into a downward spiral. If families are unable to provide structure and boundaries, children learn to use coercion in their relationships. Children take that behavior into other social behaviors with school, peers, and other authority. When things get too far out of control, a parent will be tempted to give up on a child, thus taking away an avenue to socialize the child. Schools also isolate these children through punishment and detention, and another opportunity for pro-socialization is lost. Youth gravitates towards similar peers and in adolescent identification with a deviant peer group.

## ***The Importance Of Dealing With Aggression As It Emerges***

Foster parents should deal with day-to-day occurrences of aggressive behavior such as noncompliance, teasing, whining, and scolding before they escalate into high intensity aggressive behavior like hitting, stabbing and shooting. Aggressive behaviors develop in a sequence. They may begin with antisocial behavior in early childhood with arguing, bragging and demanding attention. This progresses in middle childhood to cruelty, fighting, and poor peer relations and may evolve into such adolescent behavior as assault, theft, arson, substance abuse and running away. These are considered conduct disorders.

Conduct disorders or anti-social behavior is a syndrome or constellation of symptoms including fighting, truancy, theft, and temper tantrums, destroying one’s own or another person’s property, arguing, threatening others, running away, poor peer relationships, and school problems. For boys, these behaviors begin to be seen between 8 to 10 years; for girls, onset occurs around 14 to 16 years. Dealing with aggressive behavior early on in childhood and adolescence can contribute to the prevention of more violent behavior as older adolescents or young adults.

## ***What Does This Mean For Foster Parents?***

For every child you care for, intervene early into any aggressive behavior you observe in children. This is especially critical with school aged children, because this is a time that patterns begin to be set. Aggressive behaviors are more difficult to handle in adolescents because of their size and developmental stage. Strategies present in **Part Two** will help children improve their social skills.

As a foster parent, you may be caring for children who have an established pattern of aggression. These children have learned to use threatening and aggression to get what they want. They will push you to see how far you will go. How you discipline and how you de-escalate potentially violent situations is critical. It is also a great opportunity for foster parents to encourage social skills development in children. If you work with a substitute or a babysitter, make sure that they are aware of the child's issues of aggression and how to handle them.



Also, realize your limitations as a foster parent. Don't become a victim of "magical thinking." You can set up an environment that helps a child learn appropriate behavior and you can provide limits where necessary. But you can't force a child to change or act a certain way. It is the foster family's responsibility to ensure a safe environment for family members. The techniques in **Part Two** will help promote appropriate social behavior in children but they are not magic solutions for children with aggressive behavior. However, a non-violent household and a consistent response to behavior should contribute to changing unhealthy behaviors in children.



## **CARING FOR THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD** **IN FOSTER CARE**

### ***Part Two: Preventing Aggressive Behavior*** ***By Encouraging Positive Behavior***

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Deal with a child's pattern of aggression with a two pronged approach. *First*, put the majority of your time into teaching children how to handle themselves properly. *Secondly*, learn skills to deal with a child who is escalating toward aggression or being violent. **Part Two** highlights strategies to promote pro-social behaviors in children. Part Three highlights skills to deescalate an angry child. No *one* approach will stop aggressive behavior. But by using these strategies, you set a tone in your home that will increase the behaviors you want and decrease the ones you don't.

## **Strategy #1: Provide Clear House Rules Of What Is Acceptable.**

House rules set a standard of what will be tolerated in your home. Every foster home's rules should include: "It is not okay to hurt yourself, hurt others or destroy property." Repeat your house rules when dealing with behavior.

*"Sammy, it's not okay to hit your brother. The rule in this house is that it is not okay to hurt another person or hurt yourself."*

Rules do not stop aggressive behavior. You must enforce rules through consequences. Always intervene when a child shows aggressive behavior. Try to use consequences that relate directly to the child's action. Consequences should happen every time so children will learn that their harmful and hurtful acts will not be tolerated.

*A young child throws his toy truck at another child. He must take a five-minute time out to calm himself down.*

*An older child breaks a lamp in anger. After he calms down, you work out a plan for him to do chores around the house to earn money to replace the lamp.*

### **How Do You Put Strategy #1 Into Action?**

- ◆ Write down three important rules in your home. Think about how you communicate the rule to family members. Does everyone know about the rule? What are the consequences when the rules are broken? If you have trouble answering these questions, your child will probably have trouble knowing what your house rules are. Your rules should be kept to a minimum and each should be important.
- ◆ Post your rules in a place where everyone can see them (on the wall, by the phone or on the refrigerator.) Put rules in writing for older children. Repeat the rule about "no hitting/ no hurting" often if the children in your home are aggressive. ***Make sure this rule applies to everyone in the family, including foster parents.***

## **Strategy #2: Pay Attention To A Child's Whereabouts.**

This is a simple but important parenting tool with aggressive children. The presence of an adult can inhibit aggressive behavior. You should provide a high level of supervision for the aggressive child, especially if there are other children in the family. For older children, establish a house rule that they must let you know where they are and must ask permission if they want to go someplace out of the normal routine. Making your child responsible for letting you know where they are establishes safety and accountability. Children who have a history of acting out often get in trouble when left unsupervised. This measure of supervision and accountability also prevents anti-social behavior by promoting attachment and identity to

a family system. Without attachment and identity with a group, the child is not invested in following the rules of that group. A simple rule of always letting your foster parents know where you are is very important in childhood.

This strategy should also include the ways you help your foster child form an attachment to your family. This includes spending time together, sharing stories or jokes, sharing activities, physically caring for the child, and establishing an emotional relationship. Children who feel an attachment to a group want to do things to please that group. It is better that a child is attached to your family than to a gang or a negative peer group.

### **How Do You Put Strategy #2 Into Action?**

- ◆ Establish clear house rules about curfews and an expectation that children always let you know where they are. Many children aren't used to such close supervision. You may need to teach them the basic steps of telling you where they are. (See the section on *Teaching Social Skills* for ideas). Emphasize this is a safety rule and that as a parent, it is your responsibility to help everyone stay safe.
- ◆ Connect with each of your children often: in the morning, after school, during mealtimes, at bedtime. Make a special effort to connect in a positive way everyday with a child with a pattern of aggression.
- ◆ Each week (such as at a family meeting or during mealtime), discuss what is happening for family members that week. Make a family calendar of important events. This helps you plan and get organized, but it also lets children know you are interested in what they are doing. This builds identity and support within the family.

### **Strategy #3: Structure The Environment To Decrease Aggression.**

As a foster parent, you don't have control over what experience a child brings into your home. But you do have control over what goes on in your household. Your house rules set these expectations. You should also provide structure in the environment to help children do well in your home. For example, research confirms that watching violent television programs results in a temporary increase in aggressive behavior in children. You should strictly monitor any videos, television programs or video games your children watch, especially if you have children who tend to be aggressive in your home

Another way to structure the environment for success is to establish routines for everyday activities in your home. When children know what to expect, they are calmer and more secure. Routines help establish stability. (You know as a parent that when the routine gets disrupted, it is often when children misbehave the most!)

MODEL, MODEL, MODEL! It can't be said enough. Your actions speak louder than words. If you yell, cut people down with your words, are disrespectful, or are aggressive yourself,

your children will imitate your behavior. If you handle your anger positively, talk out problems, take a break when getting out of control, and avoid namecalling, your children will imitate your behavior. For older boys in particular, having positive relationship with an adult male can be incredibly helpful in decreasing inappropriate behavior and increasing a healthy self-image.

### **How Do You Put Strategy #3 Into Action?**

- ◆ Review your rules around issues of television, videos, movies, video games, and computer use. Watch these programs with your children. If your children use the Internet, keep the computer in a public place to monitor. Keep violent games and activities to a minimum. Keep this in mind when buying toys.
- ◆ What is the most difficult part of your family's day? Is there a routine or a structure you can put into place that will make things go better? For example, if the time between the end of school and dinner is a rough time, plan a regular snack and a talk with the children after school and serve a smaller dinner. Children won't be so cranky and problems should decrease.
- ◆ Determine what will help your individual children be successful? Children who are alcohol affected, victims of physical abuse or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder often have a difficult time with impulsiveness, which leads to aggression. These children require fewer distractions, more structure, close supervision and lots of positive supports to help them do the right thing.
- ◆ With an active child, provide as many physical outlets as possible such as a basketball hoop or regular trips to parks to run and play. Wear those kids out! Pent up energy results in aggressive behaviors in the wrong place. Also teach a child to enjoy quiet activities such as walks, reading, conversations, card games, fishing, berry picking, hobbies or crafts.

## **Strategy #4: Promote Pro-Social Behavior By Building Social Skills.**

“Pro-social behavior” is behavior that is generally acceptable to others and to the community. Aggression is not acceptable in most social situations. To change aggressive patterns, the rule of thumb is to spend more time engaging the child in positive behaviors than punishing the child for negative behaviors. You need to do both. But if you are going to change behavior, you must spend more time on the positive and the teaching.

We will explore three ways to promote pro-social behavior: *use pre-teaching, promote empathy, and teach social skills.*

**1. Use Pre-Teaching:** Pre-teaching means explaining rules ahead of time and rehearsing a child's responses. This strategy gives a parent the opportunity to review rules and expectations, and sets a child up to be successful. When using pre-teaching, think of yourself

as a *coach* (encouraging, teaching, supporting) rather than a *judge* (punishing, judging, right or wrong.)

**JUDGING:** A foster mother explains to her child, “You always mess up in the store. So these are the rules. If you throw a tantrum or run around the store, I’m not going to buy you any candy.” She reminds the child that he is usually bad in the store and she expects him to be bad again. She uses a punishment as a threat.

**COACHING:** A foster mother explains to her child, “We’re going into the store. While we’re in there I want you to remember the rules. You can either stay in the cart or stand by my side. If you run around the store, you need to sit in the cart. If you need my attention, ask me in your nice voice. And I’m not buying any candy today, but you may help me pick out tonight’s dessert if you do a good job.” In the store, the foster parent engages the child by giving him small tasks or playing counting games. At one point, he starts running away, and the foster mother says, “I see you choose to sit in the cart for a few minutes.” When they leave the store, she says, “Sammy, you followed direction by using your nice voice to ask me for help and you were able to stay close to me for most of the trip. Maybe next time you will be able to follow the rule of staying close the whole time.” This mother sets up her expectations in a positive way. She provides a consequence, but she also provides a reward for successful behavior. She coached him in how he can be successful the next trip.

### **How Do You Put Pre-Teaching Into Action?**

- ◆ The next time you take a child into a new situation, spend a few minutes explaining the rules and your expectations. Tell him you know he can do a good job and you have confidence he can do well. At the end of the situation, point out how the child followed your instructions and praise him.
- ◆ After a difficult situation, ask the child what he could do differently the next time. If necessary, apply a consequence for inappropriate behavior. End on a positive note such as “I know you are trying and that these are new ways to you, but I know you can do a good job. You’ll get another chance.”

**2. Promote Empathy:** Empathy is being able to understand another person’s feelings or perspective. Empathy is a significant factor in controlling of aggression. Empathic people are less likely to misunderstand and become angry about other’s behavior. When you can relate to another person’s feelings, you tend to inhibit aggressive behavior because you don’t want to inflict pain or distress on that person. Lack of empathy is related to increased aggressiveness. In your work with the aggressive child, work on understand and identifying the feelings in others.

### **How Do You Put Promoting Empathy Into Action?**

- ◆ Post pictures of people’s faces on the wall. Have your child draw or pick out faces from magazines. Ask your child what he thinks the person is feeling. Talk often about your own feelings and encourage a child to talk about his. If a child has trouble with feelings, put words into his mouth,



such as “I think if she fell down, she must be hurting and wants to cry.” “I bet you feels hurt that your friend didn’t respect your feelings and called you a name.”

- ◆ When talking to a child about his behavior, always ask, “How do you think that made her feel? Have you ever felt like that? Did it make you feel bad? What do you think would be a better way to handle that situation?” This language forces a child to think in “feelings”. Many children feel badly that they got caught doing something. We also need to help them feel badly about how their actions hurt others.
- ◆ Model and encourage acts of kindness and concern towards others.
- ◆ A foster home that care for teens promotes empathy through a writing exercise. When the teen breaks a rule, the teen needs to go to his room and write down what he did, what he was thinking at the time, how his actions affected the other people in the house and what he thinks he should do differently the next time. The foster parents then discuss the answers with the teen and use his responses to promote empathy and accountability.

**3. Teach social skills:** This is a form of pre-teaching. You teach a basic social skill to a child in anticipation of him using it. For example, if you disagree with someone, you don’t hit him. You explain your position and stand up for your beliefs. If you want something and your parent says no, you don’t blow up and throw a tantrum. You learn to accept no for an answer or ask to talk about it further.

For children who are non-compliant or anti-social, we need to teach basic skills. Take a basic skill and break it down into steps. Review the steps and practice with a child. Work on just one skill at a time. Use lots of encouragement and praise. **GRAPH #1** gives examples of basic social skills children should learn and how to break them into steps.

### **How Do You Put Teaching Social Skills Into Action?**

- ◆ Take one of the skills in **Graph 1** and write it on a 3 X 5 card. Bring the skill up at a family meeting, or in a calm moment with a child. Practice. When children follow the practice, encourage them. “Mary, you did a great job accepting ‘No’ as an answer according to the way we have practiced. It makes you more pleasant to be around and I am more inclined to say ‘Yes’ when I can.” When teaching, do not let the session turn into a battle. Point out to the child that these skills will help them be more successful and happy and this is how you expect children to act in your home.

## TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS

**SKILL:** *Following instructions*

1. Look at the person.
2. Say "Okay."
2. Do what you've been asked right away.
3. Check back and let your parent know you are finished.

**SKILL:** *Accepting no for an answer*

1. Look at the person.
2. Say "Okay".
3. Stay calm.
4. If you disagree, ask to talk about it again later.

**SKILL:** *Asking for help*

1. Look at the person.
2. Ask person if he or she has time to help you (now or later).
3. Clearly describe the problem or what kind of help you need.
4. Thank the person for helping you.

**SKILL:** *Making a request*

1. Look at the person.
2. Use a clear ,pleasant voice.
3. Make your request in the form of a question by saying "Would you please...."
4. If your request is granted, remember to say "Thank you."
5. If your request is denied, remember to accept "No" for an answer.

**SKILL:** *Reporting whereabouts*

1. Look at person (if report is made in person).
2. Use a pleasant voice tone.
3. Explain where you'll be and when you'll be back.
4. Wait for acknowledgment.
5. Thank person for listening.
6. Let person know if plan changes.

**GRAPH #1:** From Working with Aggressive Youth, Boys Town Press, 1989

## Strategy #5: Teach Problem Solving And Anger Management.

Life will invariably frustrate us and make us angry. We can deal with these frustrations appropriately or in ways that will hurt ourselves or hurt others. We can teach children positive skills to deal with life's challenges. Two skills we can teach children are *anger management* and *problem solving*.

### ***Anger Management***

We just can't teach children "not to get mad." We have to teach them what to do with that anger. When a child is calm, talk to him about his anger. Talk to him about strategies to help him stay in control and make good decisions for himself. Give him something to do. For example, children need to learn how to stay out of a fight. So you can teach a child who is getting mad or being teased to take a deep breath, repeat a phrase in his head such as "Easy does it. I can stay in control. I can choose how I act. I'm getting better everyday. I don't have to fight." Teach him to say, "I'm not getting into this" and walk away.

When a child gets angry at another person, he can learn how to use "I" statements to put his feelings into words, instead of using his fists. "I" statements follow a simple formula.

DESCRIBE THE SITUATION.	"When you _____
DESCRIBE HOW YOU FEEL.	I feel _____
TELL WHY YOU FEEL THAT WAY.	because _____."

**EXAMPLE:** *A sister borrows a sweater and returns it with a tear in it. Your foster daughter is furious. Instead of yelling at her sister or trying to slap her, your foster daughter can use an "I" statement to talk to her about it. She can take a deep breath to calm herself down and say "When you take my sweater and return it ruined, I feel upset because I like this sweater and now I can't wear it."*

"I" statements do not solve problems by themselves and it is important to tell children that. But "I" statements provide a way for your foster child to learn how to talk about her feelings. If you use "I" statement when talking about your angry feelings, you will model how they work. *Problem solving* is the next skill children and adults can use to deal with conflicts.

### ***Problem Solving***

Problem solving has five steps. These steps include:

1. *Decide what the problem is.*
2. *Decide upon a mutually acceptable goal.*
3. *Brainstorm several different ways to deal with it.*
4. *Choose one and put it into practice.*
5. *Check back in a specified amount of time.*

Problem solving can be used to solve a problem between two people. But it can also be used by an individual to make a good choice for himself. The simple action of brainstorming solutions to problems shows kids that there are many ways to solve a problem. Considering

and choosing an option that will work also gives a sense of control to a child who may be feeling very out-of-control.

**How Do You Put Strategy #5 Into Action?:**

- ◆ Hold a weekly house meeting to both solve problems and celebrate successes. Follow the five steps of problem solving listed above to solve conflicts between two children. Write up a solution and check back after a few days. Encourage children to use problem solving for situations at school, with birth parents, or with peers.
- ◆ Problem solving can be used to help a child learn to manage his anger. A child's problem is not that he gets angry. The problem is that when he gets angry, he hits and name-calls. The goal for the child is to find a way to get angry without hurting others or destroying property. He should choose something that he thinks he is capable of doing. It may include taking a time out, trying I statements, punching a pillow, shooting baskets, or talking to an adult. Write up a contract and give it a try. Set small goals, such as going two days using the new method. To encourage a child to follow the plan, build in a reward or special privilege for success.

**Strategy #6: Reward Positive Behavior.**

Positive behavior should get positive reactions from foster parents, especially at the beginning when these behaviors are new. You can provide positive reaction through positive words, interactions or rewards.

***Notice Positive Behavior By Your Words***

The children in our care often get lots more attention for their bad behaviors, so most of what these children hear is negative. So include lots of positive words in your vocabulary. Sprinkle lots of the following phrases in your interactions with your child. Try to describe a child's specific behavior.

- ◆ Good thinking!
- ◆ That made me feel good, thanks!
- ◆ I am enjoying our time together.
- ◆ You are trying hard and it shows.
- ◆ You did a nice job following instructions.
- ◆ You have a really good sense of humor.
- ◆ I like having you around.
- ◆ I never thought of it that way.
- ◆ You did a great job.
- ◆ That's very creative, very original.
- ◆ We can do this together.
- ◆ That's very helpful when you hold the door for me.

***Note to Foster Parent:*** Give feedback honestly. Fake praise or words you don't really mean will cause more damage than good. Also, do not over praise a child. Be matter of fact and brief, but do notice a child's good behavior.

### ***Help Children Earn Rewards Through Their Behavior***

Rewards can be a good motivator for some children. Rewards aren't bribes. Rewards are earned when a child shows an improvement in behavior. For younger children, use a chart that lists a specific aggressive behavior you want to change and includes a reward the child can earn. At first, let a child earn points or rewards fairly easily. When the behavior gets to be a pattern, increase the number of times a child has to follow the rules in order to get the reward. At the point when the pattern is established, drop the reward

Use a point system with an older child. A child earns a certain number of points for certain behavior or loses points for a certain behavior. Points can be traded for predetermined activities or rewards. Involve a child in constructing the point system or he won't be motivated to use it.

***Things To Use As Rewards:*** With a child, make a list of what he would like as a reward. Who does he like to spend time with? What special activities does he like? What would he like to do with you? What are his favorite foods? Are there special privileges that he would like to have? This list can form your list of rewards.

***Things To Use As Consequences:*** Make up a list of privileges that may be lost as a result of negative behavior. This may include telephone usage, television time, car use, bicycle skateboard, visiting with a friend, stereo or radio use, or staying up late. This list can form your list of consequences or loss of privileges.

### ***How Do You Put Strategy #6 Into Action?***

- ◆ Make a special point today to say three positive things to your foster child. Focus on his behavior or how you feel when you are with him. Be brief, and be honest, *but say it*.
- ◆ Make up a list of five-minute work chores. Explain to children that when they are noncompliant or sass back, the consequence may be a five-minute work chore that they need to complete immediately. Make it brief (one you could do in less than five minutes). Children will learn there is always a consequence for noncompliance and that it is easier to comply with your request than to do the chore.
- ◆ Choose one aggressive behavior in your child. Set aside a time to express your concerns to a child. Come up with a contract or a chart where the child can earn points or an activity by showing appropriate behavior in specific situations. Use a listing of rewards and consequences that you brainstorm with a child as the basis for the program.

## **12 Ways To Promote Appropriate Behavior & Decrease Aggression**

- 1. Establish Clear House Rules.**
- 2. Pay Attention To Where Children Are.**
- 3. Avoid Violent Television Shows, Videos And Games.**
- 4. Set Up An Orderly Household With A Sense Of Routine & Structure.**
- 5. Use Pre-Teaching to Set Children Up For Success.**
- 6. Teach Social Skills By Breaking Them Down Into Steps.**
- 7. Teach Children To Manage Their Anger.**
- 8. Teach Children To Use “I” Statements For Feelings.**
- 9. Promote Empathy with Other People’s Feelings.**
- 10. Teach Problem Solving Skills.**
- 11. Reward and Praise Positive Behaviors.**
- 12. Provide Consequences For Aggressive Behaviors.**

**GRAPH 2:** *Review of Strategies to Decrease Aggression.*



## **CARING FOR THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD** **IN FOSTER CARE**

### *Part Three: Responding To Out-of-Control Or Potentially Violent Angry Behavior*

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Aggressive children are very responsive to the teaching strategies outlined in *Part Two*. However, sometimes children will spiral out of control despite your best efforts. When a child is out of control, the teaching window closes. ***Whenever possible, do not give in or make a deal to prevent a child from escalating.*** When a child is escalating or in danger of being violent, your focus should be on calming the situation and keeping family members safe.



### **FIRST STEP: De-Escalate The Situation**

**First, keep yourself in control.** If you yell, raise your voice, talk a lot, lecture, argue, or threaten, you escalate the situation even more.

1. **Lower your voice.** Talk slower. Listen. Be gentle. Think before you talk. Slow the pace down.
2. **Breathe!** Don't hold your breath! Breathing relaxes us; holding the breath tenses us up. Relax yourself before trying to calm down an angry child.
3. **Take a Break.** Take a two minute time out. Tell the child you want to talk about this, but you want to think about it. Get a glass of water and drink it slowly.

**Then, do things to prevent the situation from escalating.**

4. **Back Away.** For teens that tend to be aggressive, moving into their space or putting your hand on them is seen as an attack and it may accelerate the situation. Do not touch an angry older child. It may escalate a child and increase the risk of his striking out.
5. **Be supportive.** Ask questions, and reflect feelings. *"I can see you are really upset about this."* *"Tell me what you think should happen."* *"I don't understand, but I want to."* It is difficult for a child to fight against someone who is on his side. Encourage him to put his feelings into words. In **Working with the Aggressive Youth**, the author says, "Frequently the difference between defusing a situation and creating a crisis is using empathy and giving the youth an opportunity to recover, rather than making them feel like they are being backed into a corner."

6. Avoid sarcasm. Phrases like “*Well, that was brilliant.*” and “*Come on, grow up!*” make a child resentful and angrier. Humor with a light touch, however, can be a great tension breaker.
7. When a child tries to engage you in an argument, use the Broken Record Approach. Acknowledge you heard the child, but continue to repeat your request in a calm voice. Children and teens will often try to hook you into an argument to get you distracted from the situation at hand. The Broken Record approach helps you stay on track.
8. You may need to deliver a negative consequence if a child is being aggressive. This may include a timeout or a removal of a privilege. For the child with a pattern of aggression, these consequences should be made clear ahead of time.
9. Combine empathy with a specific instruction. Help a child get back into control with a statement such as “*I know it is hard to listen to criticism, but you need to sit down so we can talk about it.*” This cue for appropriate behavior is especially important for children who are impulsive and may act without thinking.
10. When things begin to escalate, break the interaction. Sit down so that you are not towering over the child. Say in a calm voice:

*“You know what, we are starting to have an argument. I don’t want to fight. If you want to talk this over, let’s sit down and talk. But I don’t want to argue.”* **OR**

*“I’m too upset to talk about this right now. Let’s take a break and come back and talk about your concerns in fifteen minutes so we can both take a breather.”*



## **SECOND STEP: Crisis Management**

If these techniques are not working or if a child is potentially violent, you need to move into crisis management. At this point, you do not try to teach a child anything or attempt to use discipline. You calm the child down and get the situation back in control. Crisis management is a short-term solution. Behavior change does not happen on this level.

1. Remain calm. Do not accelerate your behavior because the child is accelerating.
2. State the seriousness of the situation. “*This is getting really serious. We need to sit down and talk.*” **OR** “*We are not getting anything accomplished this way.*”
3. Throughout this process, give children positive feedback when they comply with your request. “*I know you’re very upset, but you are showing lots of control by sitting down.*”

Use empathy statements to let the youth know you are working with him. *“I know you feel this is unfair, but you need to sit down so we can talk about it further.”*

4. Clear the room of others. Say to other children, “Guys, I am asking you to leave the room so we can work this problem out.” This prevents an audience and gets others out of the way of the potential aggressor. If your spouse or another adult is in the building, you may wish to call them into the room to help or act as mediator.
5. Do not respond to content or get hooked into defending yourself. Focus on behavior. Avoid statements such as *“Calm down! You know that you are being unreasonable about wanting a 3 p.m. curfew.”* gets you hooked back into an argument.
6. Focus on the youth’s behavior. Keep repeating what the youth is doing and what you want him or her to do instead. Focus on behavior, not on reasoning. *“Bill, you need to stop walking around and sit down.”* Or *“You are yelling, Sandy. You need to lower your voice so we can talk about this.”*
7. Reward compliance by giving back lost privileges. *“Sammy, you have stopped waving your arms and you are no longer yelling. You are beginning to earn back some of the privileges you lost when you started to yell.”*
8. With a highly agitated youth, don’t talk too much! Give instructions and offer empathy, but use “silent expectation” between your requests. This gives a child time to wind down and to comply. One study shows that with young children that the strongest point of resistance to a parent’s request was in the first several seconds. When parents made a request and then counted to ten before requesting again, compliance was much higher.
9. If a teen with a history of violence attempts to leave the building, request that they stay and finish talking with you but do not block their way or grab them. This will probably lead to a scuffle. With younger children, of course, you will need to prevent them from leaving.
10. If a child is hurting others or destroying property, deal with the situation the best you can. You may need to call for assistance (including the police) or restrain the child. You can deal with ruined property when things calm down but you may need to intervene immediately if another child is getting hurt or if a child is attacking you.



## ***Using Physical Restraint With A Foster Child***

Whenever possible, **foster parents should not use physical restraint with a child.** But if a child is hurting others or himself, restraint may be necessary. (*Restraint means to physically pin a child's arms or legs so that he cannot move.*) Foster care regulations (**AAC50.435**) offer the following guidance for using physical restraint.

*“A child in care may not be... physically restrained except when necessary to protect a young child from accident, protect persons on the premises from physical injury or protect property from serious damage and then only passive physical restraint may be used.”* From The State of Alaska Regulations Guiding Foster Care (AAC 50.435 Behavior Guidance)

A foster parent may need to restrain a young child who is about to hurt himself or who is about to hurt another child. A foster parent should not use physical restraint as a punishment or show a child “who’s the boss.”

Physical restraint should be your last resort to protect a child or others from injury. It should not be the first thing you try. Physical restraint does not tell a child what he should be doing. For some children it may increase resentment or revenge behaviors. ***Using physical restraint may result in harm to a child or to the foster parent.*** Use it only in emergencies. When things begin to escalate, first use the techniques listed in this self-study to keep things from becoming unmanageable.

Some children in foster care have emotional disorders in which they often have tantrums. The foster parent may be advised by a counselor to restrain a child during these times. Always get these instructions in writing and advise the social worker of the plan. If a foster parent is using restraint on the advice of a third party, it needs to be approved by the social worker. It should also be written into the placement plan to protect the foster parent and the child.

### **When Using Physical Restraint:**

1. Avoid physical restraint with an adolescent. Unless you are specially trained, someone will get hurt. If you fear that a teen is going to cause physical harm or is damaging property, call the authorities.
2. If you use physical restraint, approach the child from behind and wrap your arms around the child’s arm at the elbow to keep them from flailing and from biting your arms. Move your head to one side to prevent backward head butts. Slide to the floor to prevent a child from kicking you. With a small child, sit in a chair and hook your legs over his to prevent him from kicking. Say soothing things, such as “I’ll hold you until we both calm down” or “I’ll help you get back in control.” This is not a time for lectures, but to calm down. Wait until child is completely calm before releasing him.
3. Talk with the child afterwards about what led up to the restraint, what house rules were violated, and plans of how this is not going to happen again. Review in your own mind what led up to the situation. Is there something you can do in the future to avoid it?



4. If you have an incident where you find it necessary to use physical restraint with a child, you should contact the child's caseworker soon after the event. Describe what led up to the incident, exactly what you did and how long was the restraint and what happened afterwards.



## THIRD STEP: Return to Problem Solving

**Part One** explored how children learn to use aggression as a way to get power in a family. If we let a child's aggression stop a consequence or win a situation, he will continue to use aggression to get what he wants. After a blow up (not during), talk to the child about what happened, in a calm non-blaming voice. Use the problem solving process to come up with a mutual solution of how to handle the situation the next time. Always express confidence that a child will do well. Remember, during crisis, no teaching occurs. You must return to problem solving and the techniques highlighted in **Part Two** to encourage changes in behavior.

It is at this point, you may talk with the child about any consequences that might have resulted from his action. Not all consequences need to be big, but there should always be some consequence for aggressive behavior.

*One foster father removed the door to his child's bedroom for three days after the child slammed the door and kicked it. This lack of privacy for a short time was such an effective consequence, that neither he nor the three other boys living in the house used door slamming again as a way to express anger.*

### ***Final Reminders When You Are Fostering An Aggressive Child***

When you get to know your children, you can anticipate what may "set them off." Use the techniques in **Part Two** to prevent crisis situations from developing. Remember, once situation escalate to a crisis, it becomes harder to calm a child down. When things start revving up, use your de-escalation skills to keep them from getting too far out of control.

If you have an aggressive child placed in your home, set up a plan of what to do if the child becomes violent. Talk to your social worker or the child's counselor to help you make this plan.

One of your jobs as a foster parent is to keep the other children in your home safe. Some children may be too aggressive or violent to be placed with other children or in a foster home. These may be children who have psychiatric disorders, emotional disorder or histories of delinquency who may need a more structured situation such as a residential center or group home. Talk to the child's social worker if you feel you are caring for a child like this.

# TEST