

TOPIC: *Stinky, Smelly and Unkempt:*

Hygiene Issues for Foster Children

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Micro Training Course Developed by Aileen McInnis, Alaska Center for Resource Families

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:

**Read through this self-study.*

**Fill out the "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" Questionnaire*

**Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.*

It's a tough issue for foster parents. What if the teenage girl in your home refuses to shower? What if your foster son urinates in his bed every night and you suspect it has something to do with his past history of sexual abuse? What about your foster daughter who doesn't take care of herself during her menstrual cycles and is made fun of at school? It is delicate at best to talk to someone about her smell or appearance. And why would a youth let himself stink anyway? Especially an adolescent who is supposed to care so much about what peers think? There are many reasons why a youth lacks in hygiene. One simple reason is he was never taught the basic skills of regular washing, taking care of "the stinky parts," and wiping after using the toilet. Some of it may be age appropriate behavior. Little boys and dirt usually go together! They don't like to take baths and get clean. When kids hit puberty, they perspire more and may smell more as a result. For some youth, the answer might be a remedial hygiene lesson, done matter-of-factly but kindly, without ridicule. Setting up a regular routine may help in this area and visual reminders and lists can help keep a kid on track. The underlying issue is education and basic hygiene and toilet training because they may not have been taught the first time around.

So let's talk about why they might show this behavior in the first place.

Sexual abuse – Kids who have been sexually abused use body odor and hygiene as a way to ward off predators. If they soil their clothes, don't bathe, or don't change clothes, they will eventually become offensive smelling. This will keep people at a distance. People who don't get close can't abuse them. Being unattractive on the outside may be a sign of how she feels on the inside. It keeps people away from hurting her and makes her unattractive to others so she won't get hurt/taken advantage of sexually. Many sexually abused children have no one to protect them so they try to find ways to protect themselves. Some of them come to believe that if they and their surroundings smell, they will be safe from trespassers. So *safety* and *protection* is the underlying issue.

Attachment issues – Kids who don't feel loved or don't want to get too close to someone use hygiene much the same way as the sexually abused child. They don't want to be hugged or kissed because that means this person cares about them, and that is scary. If people care, they might start to care and when that has happened in the past they have been physically or emotionally hurt. Rather than risk that pain again, it's safer to keep everyone away. So *trust* is the underlying issue.

Control issues – Sometimes very pleasant children can have odd behaviors like hiding soiled underpants or smearing feces or peeing in the corner. There can be several reasons for this including warding off people with their behavior; a passive-aggressive approach to repressed feelings and anger (I can't tell you I am mad but I can do something to get back at you); or control battles with the parent. Can you make a child bathe or use the toilet? Well, not really. Children and youth may have had battles and control issues from

their previous homes and foster parents may unwittingly repeat them. The underlying issues include helping children *communicate anger and aggression* in appropriate ways, teaching the use of *language to name the feelings* and helping children *feel some control* over their lives.

Emotional issues – Some children have psychological reasons of why they let themselves smell or come across as dirty or unkempt or put on a ton of weight. Your youth may be conveying their inner feeling rather than talking about them. They may be telling you that they feel gross and disgusting, or unclean. Some youth might be depressed, and truly don't care about how they look or don't have the energy to take care of themselves. All the good smelling shampoo in the world is not going to help until that underlying state of depression is relieved. Depressed people might need coaxing to complete basic tasks. So underlying mental health and well-being are the issues here.

Alan Corrick, Fairbanks resource parent, mentions **Developmental Issues**. "It's VERY important to determine if there are any special needs issues involved, cognitively or developmentally, in the hygiene problem. If there are, as with all special needs/developmental delays, your response is structured to the stage the child is at, up to supervising the child taking care of their body routines (being very parental). If there are no developmental issues, make sure there are no mental health issues either, as lack of hygiene can also be an indicator for various mental health conditions." He continues, "In the parents who have approached us on these matters, roughly a third have had one of these two situations going on with their children and were not looking at the cleanliness/offensiveness problem as a symptom of special needs or mental health."

A large part of dealing with this issue is figuring out the reasons behind it. Face it, until safety, security, and trust is established, it is difficult to suddenly convince a child that wiping your stinky parts is something you need to do every day! Look for the reasons behind the behavior why a child insist on sleeping in a bed soaked with urine or why a teen might refuse to shower to the point she repels people with her smell. If the reason is one of protection or fear, consider these ideas:

- ** Try to find out specific fears of the child. Help the child talk about these fears.
- ** Give the child alternative ways of feeling safe, especially at night or when most threatened.
- ** Let the child know you are going to keep him or her safe and demonstrate it by showing locks, how to summon you at night, etc.
- ** Use this issue as a way to express parental care and concern and to protect the child from comments from other children and possibly even adults. This is a chance to grow your relationship and help a child learn that you are there to keep him safe and take care of him.
- ** Children with a history of sexual abuse who are showing this level of fear would benefit from seeing a therapist to help work through the issues.
- ** Talk to all your children about how to use the bathroom and clean up afterwards and what your basic hygiene routine is. Be straight forward and factual, but don't compound existing shame through yelling or criticizing or ridiculing a child into compliance. Further shame could make things worse.

A child or youth needs you to parent, which means caring enough to take the time to teach and understand, and having the patience to help a youth trust you. Life as a foster parent may not always smell like a rose, but it is important work nonetheless. ■