What Do These Behaviors Mean?
How Children Process & Respond to Trauma

Does the following scenario feel familiar?

"I don't know."

"I don't remember."

"I found it on the bus."

She's looking away. There's no eye contact. She seems bored with your conversation, but she's fidgeting. The Legos start clicking together. You just asked her about a doll you found in her room stuffed at the bottom of the toy bin. The doll is not hers. Your neck feels tense.

Your first reaction to her may not be what you had planned. You may feel anger, defensiveness. After all, the child's actions hurt another child. She seems to have no remorse. And then there's this pattern of lying. You feel the child before you is like a professional in her ability to dodge the truth. You're tempted to say she's trying to manipulate you again.

Then you pause. You breathe. You remember—this is trauma. You walk out of the room and take some deep breaths because you want to talk with her in a way that will create a safe space and help her regulate her feelings. And that means you need to regulate your feelings.

In our original tip sheet, What Do These Behaviors Mean?, we wrote about what underlies so many challenging behaviors—behaviors like lying, stealing, aggression, defiance, hoarding, and meltdowns. And, we shared how trauma and fear are the foundation for these behaviors.

Here, we will build on that information, digging a little deeper into how kids' brains process trauma. In addition, we will share tips for how you, as a caregiver, can set kids up so that those neural pathways begin to change and healing can happen.

Behavior is the language of children. Kids are often unable to explain *why* they do things; they simply do them. So it's up to us to translate those behaviors and to respond in a way that creates safety and opens the door to learning new behaviors.

It can be a valuable exercise to start by looking at our own behavior. Think for a moment on these questions: Have you ever felt that a lie was justified for one reason or another? Have you ever been defiant with someone? Did you ever take something that truly did not belong to you and maybe justified it with some of the same language kids use with us? "It was just sitting there; it didn't seem to belong to anyone...."

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Of course, there may be times when the behaviors you're dealing with in the children you care for are much more extreme. But the underlying reasons are often the same. We felt it would be safer to lie. We knew having that "thing" would soothe us. We were angry, and that defiant remark was a result of our own emotional dysregulation.

Next, let's look at the brain and review what happens to kids experiencing trauma. Trauma lives in that deep, dark "reptilian" part of the brain called the amygdala. The important things to remember about the amygdala are that it has a memory like an elephant, and it is not connected to the verbal parts of your brain. So, kids simply cannot tell you in words what's going on when they experience trauma triggers.

The amygdala prepares the child to respond quickly to danger by flooding their body with stress hormones. These hormones prepare the child for "fight, flight, or freeze," actions designed for survival itself. Whatever triggers this hormonal response may be something that you wouldn't normally associate with danger. Consider this example: A 10-year-old boy steps off a carnival ride and immediately collapses into a meltdown, complete with sobbing, screaming, and hitting. The ride seemed like one of the milder ones at the fair to you, but for this child, it was triggering. The excitement of the ride launched his amygdala, and then his body, into survival mode.

How we react during a fight, flight, or freeze response is critical in interrupting this pattern; otherwise, the same behaviors just begin all over again. Suppose we don't create safety at that moment. In that case, the child will get stuck in a loop they can't exit until we take a different approach, an approach that emphasizes safety and acceptance above all else.

In these moments, kids need a re-boot; they need to have the opportunity to become emotionally regulated, to feel safe, and for those things to happen in the context of a relationship. Having feelings of safety occur through interacting with a person they can trust is essential. We need to create this environment before we can have teaching conversations with the child.

Following is a quick summary of steps we can take when any challenging behavior happens. (Source: Lying and Stealing: Why They Happen and What You Can Do, Champion Classrooms course)

Step 1: Consider what might be driving the child's need to steal (lie, be defiant, etc.). You may need to remind yourself that a child may not have self-awareness, language, or insight about their behavior. After you've had a chance to think about possible reasons behind the behavior, seek to make an emotional connection with the child before you move on to correction and training.

Step 2: Take a moment to evaluate your own stress level. Do your best to keep your responses calm and clear. Remind yourself that when children are in survival mode (the fight, flight, and freeze responses), they can't

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take in what you are trying to teach them.

Step 3: Connect. Use a soft, calm tone. Physically put yourself at the child's level so you can talk face to face. Just as you are working to be mindful of your tone and your words, try to keep your facial expressions gentle and open. This is an opportunity to build trust and model empathy and forgiveness.

Step 4: Help the child come up with a plan to make it right.

Step 5: Put it in the past and move on.

Remember that the amygdala is a non-verbal part of the brain. Children cannot express with words what is going on when fight, flight, or freeze kicks in. Sometimes, after the fact, they can verbalize how anxious, fearful, or upset they felt.

That takes us to the next layer of the brain, which lies outside the amygdala—the limbic system, where our emotions rule. Feelings will get attached to the chain of events when the amygdala gets activated by something and fight, flight, or freeze kicks in. We know at the most basic level, fear is the emotion kids are experiencing. But as they respond to whatever it is they're fearful of, they may have other feelings attached to the event as well.

Are all difficult behaviors coming from a place of trauma? Sometimes children may be behaving out of an emotional response to a trigger and sometimes out of a habitual pattern that they learned over time. Either way, we can't go wrong by focusing on a trauma-informed response. The teaching moment comes after the child has successfully regulated, so whether that's soon after you talk with the child or much later, the sequence is most important.

Focus on empathy rather than anger, think and be prepared to respond in the most healing way, and then practice that in your interactions with the children in your care. We urge you to remember that this is not intuitive, and it may feel awkward at first. But, with time and practice, you will become the source for regulation, learning, and trust that the child in your care craves. This healing journey is the essence of what you, as foster parents, are here for.

Naming Emotions

One thing we can do on this journey is to help children learn to label their emotions. There are many resources to help parents do that. Anything children experience has to flow through the limbic system on up to other, more thinking levels of their brains. So, we can recognize that kids are going to have emotions about just about everything. And it's important to help them put a label on those feelings, so they can start having some awareness of how they're doing.

Many kids have anger that accompanies fear. Meltdowns and aggressive behavior sometimes come from the anger that kids feel after a trauma trigger. Foster parent Natalie says, "They may feel bad about themselves after they exhibit behaviors: 'I don't know why I act like that!' They may label themselves as 'bad' or 'crazy.' It's important that we keep our eyes on healing and help them do the same. 'You are not bad. You are wounded on the inside, and that wound needs to heal. I'll be right here while you heal.'"

We want to keep reminding ourselves that at that moment, that, while the child in your care is showing challenging behaviors, they are doing the absolute best that they can.

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Resources

Tip Sheet
- What Do These Behaviors Mean?

Resource Post from the Coalition
- Resources Regarding Trauma-Informed Care

From the Lending Library
- *The Brain: Effects of Child Trauma* (DVD with Workbook Included)
- *Trauma, Brain, and Relationship: Helping Children Heal* (DVD)
- Partners Newsletter: On Trauma
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: On Trauma

From the Champion Classrooms
- Lying & Stealing: Why They Happen and What You Can Do
- When Difficult Behaviors Arise
- Behavior as Communication

Inspiration & Hope from No Matter What Families
- Ask What Happened, Not What's Wrong
- What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean?
- Understanding Trauma
- Growing from Compassion to Empathy

Additional Resources
- Robyn Gobbel
- The Post Institute
- Beyond Consequences Institute