# Understanding Behavior in Foster Children

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## A Viewer Guide

## Introduction to the Course

This class will explore challenging behavior in foster children and how foster parents can help a child by understanding that behavior. Foster children often come into foster homes with a traumatized history and unacceptable behaviors. Parents need to be able to decipher problematic behavior in order to understand what is driving the behavior. This knowledge will enable parents to help the child heal. This course will look at the function or purpose of problem behaviors and will provide keys for unlocking the underlying meaning of challenging behaviors.

*Richard Delaney, PhD*

Richard Delaney, PhD, psychologist, author, and foster care consultant; and Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW, Director of Foster Care and Adoption Training, Institute for Human Services (IHS), Columbus, Ohio, share their many years of expertise in the areas of foster care and social work.

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. List the 3 steps for understanding a child's behavior.

2. Understand and be able to describe surface behaviors.

3. List 4 common reasons for behavior.

4. Describe the ABCs of behavior.

5. List 7 behavior trackers.

6. Describe 4 parenting styles and state their relationship to a child's behavior.

*Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW*

This companion guide provides the content of the course.

## Surface Behaviors in Foster Children

Foster parents are encouraged to identify and describe both acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in order to more clearly understand the child. When looking at behaviors, a child's temperament needs to be taken into account. The three temperaments are:

1. Adaptable – the child is positive, content, and easily adapts to change.
2. Intense – the child is often active and easily frustrated.
3. Slow-to-warm-up – the child tends to withdraw or adjust slowly to new situations.

Prenatal drug exposure and childhood abuse and neglect can impact a child's behavior.

## Describing Surface Behavior

The three steps to understanding a child's behavior:
1. Observe and describe the surface behavior.
2. Decode the underlying meaning of the behavior.
3. Understand the sequence of behavior.

The 5 behavior trackers will help parents get a good picture of a behavior. Be sure to make notes of the observable behavior.

The 5 behavior trackers:
1. **Who** is around when the behavior occurs?
2. **What**
   a. did the behavior look and sound like?
   b. happened before and after the behavior?
3. **When** does the behavior happen?
4. **Where** is the behavior most likely to happen?
5. **How** do others respond to the behavior?

In this first interactive, viewers are given questions based on the 5 behavior trackers that will be helpful describing, rather than simply labeling, a behavior. Statements are followed by an explanation.

**What was the child actually doing?**
*Look at what is happening and what is not happening.*

**What about it is unacceptable to us?**
*What would an acceptable behavior be?*

**When did the behavior begin, become noticeable, or worsen?**
*Did the onset coincide with another change in the child's life?*

**When does it happen?**
*Was there an event that preceded the behavior?*

**Were there any warning behaviors, or signs, before it happened?**
*A warning behavior is usually a sign that things are about to get worse. Knowing the child will help the parent understand warning behaviors.*

**Around whom does it happen?**
*Identifying the target of the behaviors or others near the child might reveal some good clues.*

**What happens after the behavior?**
*How did the parents respond? What did the child get out of the behavior?*

Using a tracking sheet while observing a behavior will help parents identify and describe a behavior. The tracking sheet is also helpful when talking with the child's caseworker or therapist.

## Decoding Underlying Meaning

Five decoders help parents understand why surface behaviors happen:

1. **Attention Seeking**
   The child tries to gain attention. This attention can be positive (praise) or negative (punishment or harsh words).
   *Example behavior: A child stretches the truth to get the attention of his foster parents.*

2. **Fear Factor (Avoidance)**
   The child tries to avoid or escape an undesirable or unpleasant task or individual. This may be a response to certain triggers or situations or an unconscious attempt to reduce tension or discomfort.
   *Example behavior: A 12-year-old-child physically hides behind the foster parents when strangers visit the home. The child may have been abused by strangers.*

3. **Physical/Medical**
   Physical or medical issues, such as chronic conditions or psychiatric disorders, can produce problem behaviors or symptoms.
   *Example behavior: The child may exhibit explosive behaviors because the nervous system was damaged by prenatal substance exposure.*

4. **Bias**
   The child has a particular point of view based on upbringing, negative experiences, trauma, feelings of separation or loss, etc.
   *Example behavior: A child is afraid to ask for help or reassurance. The child might misread others' intentions because of prior abuse.*

5. **Average/Typical Development**
    The child acts appropriately for his age. Sometimes a behavior perceived to be problematic is developmentally normal.  Adults often see problems where they do not exist or they over-analyze problems.
    *Example behavior: The foster youth complains he has too many chores. Most teenagers complain about chores.*

# Decoding Behavior Exercise

In this interactive exercise, viewers are asked to identify what drives the problem behaviors by selecting the best decoder (Attention Seeking, Fear Factor, Physical/Medical, Bias, or Normal Development) for the behavior in the scenario. Five short stories are followed by the correct selection and an explanation.

**Norman, a 4-year-old foster child, is very angry; anything can set him off. At the grocery store, he threw himself on the floor in a tantrum because he wanted a sugary cereal, not a healthy one.**
*Attention Seeking. Norman probably thought the best way to get what he wanted was to pitch a fit.*

**Four-year-old Sophie was prenatally exposed to drugs and alcohol. She has extreme emotions, says "no" and screams. Her parents can only figure out what she wants by trial and error.**
*Physical/Medical. Because of her exposure to drugs and alcohol, she may have difficulty regulating her emotions.*

**Twelve-year-old Marcie looks fifteen. She causes constant drama around the house and is infatuated with boys. Many times she is tearful and won't discuss her problems.**
*Normal or Attention Seeking. Being "boy crazy" is typical for a girl Marcie's age. If her drama included stalking the boy or beating up her rivals, the decoder would be attention seeking.*

In the following two stories, viewers are asked to identify multiple decoders.

**Shandra, age 7, has been in multiple foster placements over the past two years. Her mother suffers from depression and abandoned Shandra as an infant. The child worries about getting lost or being kidnapped. She has stomachaches and headaches daily before school.**
*Fear Factor, Physical/Medical, and Bias. Shandra may have separation anxiety relating to the fear of being abandoned. She has a family history of depression and has the bias she will be moved again.*

**Twelve-year-old Bobby is the oldest of four siblings from whom he is separated. He has been in several foster homes and is described as a well-behaved people pleaser who is also lethargic and indifferent. He is not engaged with the foster family and has few friends at school.**
*Bias and Normal Development. He probably sees himself (bias) as responsible for his siblings and is worried about their well-being. Feeling anxious and sad when living away from home is normal.*

# Understanding Behavior as Part of a Sequence

Behavior is part of a sequence of events. A is the **A**ntecedent, or what happened before the unacceptable **B**ehavior, or B. C represents the **C**onsequences, or outcome resulting from the behavior. Consequences can be positive or negative.

Knowing what precedes and possibly sets off an unwanted behavior will help foster parents eliminate the problem behavior.

In the following interactive exercise, viewers are asked to complete a behavior tracking sheet in order to get a clearer picture of the antecedent, behavior, and consequence. Questions are followed by the correct response and an explanation.

> *Last night after dinner, Jerrod, a 7-year-old foster child, stole his foster sister's favorite doll. Dinner seemed to be going fine. Jerrod's sister described the praise she received from her teacher and the foster mother complimented her on her effort; Jerrod got quiet. After dinner, the doll the sister sleeps with was missing. The sister became quite upset and then Jerrod "found" the doll in the closet. The foster mother didn't know what to do, since Jerrod obviously hid the doll.*

**What is the surface behavior?**
*stealing and hiding the doll*

**What about the surface behavior makes it unacceptable?**
*stealing, teasing, and negatively gaining attention is unacceptable and need to change*

**When did the behavior first start or become noticeable or worsen?**
*This is unknown but be helpful in order to fully identify the antecedent.*

**What antecedent or event preceded the stealing?**
*the mom praising and giving attention to the sister*

**Was there a warning behavior?**
*Jerrod's silence after the sister was praised*

**Around whom does it occur?**
*his mom and sister*

**What happened after the behavior?**
*Nothing. The mom confused as to what to do – punish him (for causing the problem), praise him (for helping out), or both.*

## Parenting Opportunities and Approaches

Parenting opportunities come during all three points of the behavior sequence.

**A**ntecedent
The mother could have included Jerrod in the positive attention by commenting on his good manners or finishing the meal. Also, she could have given Jerrod positive comments for helping search for the "lost" doll.

**B**ehavior
If Jerrod's "warning" behavior (eating more slowly) had been identified, the mother could have then intervened with positive attention.

Parents are encouraged to think of behaviors in terms of opportunities. It is important to stay positive and see the child's behavior as his way of communicating something about his needs, feelings, etc. The child's behavior provides a glimpse into how he sees the world, himself, and others.

## Approaches at Point C

Consequences can be positive or negative. Giving rewards (or positive reinforcement) for desirable behaviors is an effective way to change a behavior and teach new behaviors.  Behavior that is positively reinforced, or rewarded, is likely to be repeated and sustained over time.

The two most effective negative consequences are natural and logical. Natural consequences are events that just happen because something is done. Hunger is the natural consequence of not eating. Natural consequences teach important lessons about how the world works and can be a powerful deterrent to undesirable behaviors.

Logical consequences are related to a particular behavior and are often used when waiting for a natural consequence to occur is inappropriate. For example, having a bicycle taken away would be the logical consequence for a child who, despite repeated warnings, continued to ride his bike into the street.

Consequences that lack a connection to the behavior might solve the immediate problem but will not change a behavior in the long term and might be detrimental to building a secure attachment between caregiver and child.

Physical punishment (like spanking) should not be used. Laws prohibit the use of physical punishment with foster children. Physical punishment can weaken a child's attachment, reinforce the belief that parents are brutal and not to be trusted, and put the caregiver at risk for allegations of abuse.

## Approaches at Point B

Warning behaviors present an opportunity to parent. Teaching the child to negotiate, label her feelings, or use words to describe what she is feeling increase the child's behavior management skills. The parent can also reassure the child and provide quiet time to reduce stress or pressure on the child. During the behavior, the parents need to insure the child is safe and cannot harm herself. Predetermined consequences help avoid impulsive, heat-of-the-moment consequences.

## Approaches at Point A

Emphasis on the use of consequences to reduce problem behaviors is reactive. Focusing on the antecedents to behavior helps parents remain proactive by decreasing the likelihood of undesirable behavior. Tracking behavior helps parents understand what sets off a behavior so it can be proactively averted.

The key to successful foster parenting is getting to know the child by tracking the child's behavior and being proactive. Common proactive parenting techniques include:

- maintaining a positive and accepting home environment and relationship
- alerting the child to pending schedule changes
- approaching children with positive, respectful, non-urgent requests
- avoiding the "do it or else" tone of voice
- having clear expectations
- tracking the ABC of acceptable and unacceptable events.

## In Closing

Understanding a foster child's behavior is easier when the behavior is tracked and then examined by looking at the antecedent, the behavior itself, and all consequences. Using the ABCs of behavior will help children learn new behaviors and will help the parents as they create a safe and secure environment for the children.

Viewers are reminded to access the printable material in the handout section of this course.

## Bonus Section on Parenting Style

Parenting style is how the parent views raising a child and includes how the parent provides warmth and structure.

An individual's parenting beliefs, attitudes, and approaches are usually a modified version of how he or she was raised.

To help a foster child feel safe, secure, and confident in the foster home, the parents will have to adjust their parenting style to the specific needs of the child.

Research has identified four parenting styles:

1. Balanced - *high structure and high warmth*

   Parents:
   - are flexible but firm
   - offer guidance
   - discipline with flexibility
   - communicate expectations clearly
   - allow for verbal give-and-take.

   Balanced parenting style is based on two beliefs:
   1. Parents should communicate clear expectations to their children but also allow the children to have input.
   2. Parents should raise children in ways that show concern, interest, and nuturing.

2. Authoritarian - *high structure and low warmth*

   Parents:
   - value high structure
   - are highly directive
   - value obedience
   - are more controlling
   - seem distant and aloof
   - discourage talking things out with the child
   - may be called "dictators."

   Authoritarian parenting may be damaging to the foster child who has suffered physical abuse or intimidation.

3. Permissive/Laissez-Faire - *low structure and high warmth*

   Parents:
   - are more unorganized
   - are permissive
   - are very loving
   - make few demands of the child
   - have vague expectations
   - allow the child to regulate himself
   - use little discipline.

   Permissive parenting is not appropriate for a foster child who lacked structure and predictability in his previous home.

4. Rejecting/Neglecting - *low structure and low warmth*

   Parents:
   - lack control and warmth
   - do not provide structure or guidance
   - may be uninvolved
   - have minimal expectations and caring
   - lack emotional investment in the child.

   This parenting style is dangerous for any child.

*The balanced parenting style is best suited to fostering.*

Foster parents may need to adopt and maintain a balanced parenting style in order to meet agency expectations. This change can be made by:

1. Recognizing the current parenting style and noting how it differs from agency guidelines.
2. Making a conscious decision to work toward change.
3. Building a plan to guide the change.

An exercise is introduced to help viewers identify their parenting style. A foster child's statement is followed by a foster parent's response. Viewers are asked to *agree* or *disagree* with the parent's statement or indicate they are *not sure*.

*A foster child says, "I'm afraid to go to bed."*
*The foster parent responds: "Tell me about what I can do to help you feel comfortable and safe."*

**If agree:**
*It is important to listen to foster children, especially since previous parents may not have listened to what they felt and needed. There is a chance that foster children may have bedtime fears due to trauma. On the other hand, as a foster parent, you have to make decisions and lead. Talking to the child about her fears and then helping her find a way to feel more comfortable about going to sleep would be a balanced approach.*

**If disagree:**
*It is true that structure is important and that a daily schedule and bedtime routine help provide children with consistency. On the other hand, it is important for parents to listen to their foster kids. Sometimes we have to take input from them and fine-tune rules with their specific needs in mind.*

**If not sure:**
*This answer might mean that you believe that sometimes parents should listen and sometimes they should not. Maybe you feel it depends on the specifics. Foster parenting is not only about listening to children and paying attention to how they feel; sometimes children have to be encouraged to listen to their caregiver as well.*

*A foster child says,"That's not fair. You are mean."*
*The foster parent responds: "Don't be disrespectful. That's no way to talk to me."*

**If agree:**
*It is true that children benefit from knowing how to respect authority, listen to adults, and cooperate with caregivers. Disrespectful behavior is not tolerated well at home, school, or in the community. On the other hand, it is important for respect to be modeled for foster children as well. As a foster parent, you can show a respect for children that they may have never experienced before. You can respect them and teach them how to respect themselves and others.*

**If disagree:**
*When it comes to foster parenting, it might be unrealistic to demand respect from foster children, since they have been so mistreated by adults in the past. A better style of parenting might be to show them how respect is developed between parents and children. That may help to earn respect from them rather than forcing false respect out of them.*

**If not sure:**

*Perhaps you feel that the statement is too one-sided, or in one direction (children respect parents). Your belief could be that parents and children all deserve respect. And it's true that in a good foster home, you try to establish an atmosphere of respect for everyone in the family.*

> *A foster child says, "That's not right. I think you are wrong. You said that we…"*
> *The foster parent responds: "Just do what I say, now!"*

**If agree:**

*You may feel that children who disagree with or correct their foster parents are arguing and acting in a defiant way that is totally unacceptable. On the other hand, some foster children were never allowed to say how they felt, when they disagreed, or what their wishes were. Some were totally terrified and traumatized and would never disagree with their parents. In that atmosphere, children are not encouraged to talk truthfully and openly. This is not good for their healthy emotional development.*

**If disagree:**

*Your parenting style might be based, in part, on the belief that some disagreement from foster children is normal and acceptable and perhaps even desirable. On the other hand, some foster children for a variety of reasons may want to argue about almost everything. Sometimes you have to put a limit, a time limit, on that; or you want to show the child how to disagree respectfully or how to negotiate differences.*

**If not sure:**

*You may feel that sometimes children should be allowed to disagree and sometimes they should not. Tolerating some disagreement shows children that you are not intolerant of their input and their point of view. On the other hand, you might need to teach a child how to let things go, how to agree to disagree. Or, you may want to teach your foster children how to state that they disagree but still cooperate with you.*

> *A 7-year-old foster child constantly shadows and chatters to the parent. The foster mom stops her chore each time and briefly spends some one-on-one time with this child.*

**If agree:**

*You may place high priority on the fact that children need to feel close to their parents. They need our time and reassurance. Foster children may have never had a feeling of closeness, support, and warmth. They may have been unloved and left insecure and needy. On the other hand, you may need to keep in mind that children need to be guided towards playing with other children, entertaining themselves, and giving others personal space.*

**If disagree:**

*You may feel that there are other issues more important than closeness to your foster child. However, foster parents may need to be close to the child to show him how to trust others. Reassurance and positive attention teach the child self-worth. If the foster parents remain neutral or aloof, the child may mistake that for rejection.*

**If not sure:**

*Maybe you feel that sometimes it is okay to get close to a foster child and sometimes it is not okay. On the other hand, being close to foster children does not mean never having to put limits on them or never having them angry or disappointed in you and the structure you provide for them.*

The previous exercise might help parents begin to identify their parenting style and where they fall on the parenting grid. Parenting approaches have a big impact on the behavior of foster children and it is important for potential foster parents to be aware of their parenting styles and to aim for a balanced approach. It is also important to be aware of outside forces that impact parenting style, from the child's needs to the agency guidelines.

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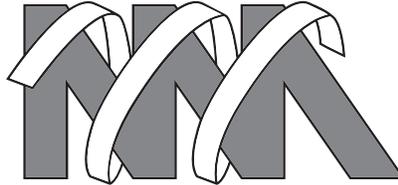
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