

Sunscreen, Acne and Sunburn... Listen, Don't Launch!
--Cathy Schweitzer, MS, LMHP

The other morning, Jeff and his mom came for their usual appointment. Jeff had been removed from his biological home for severe neglect. He spent several years in foster care moving from home to home before he was adopted. His first adoption failed, as his adoptive parents were abusive. He was adopted by his present family four years ago. He is going to be a sixth grader.

Jeff has been in therapy with me for some time. Jeff has been involved in several types of therapy, and he and his mom have returned for some more EMDR.

So back to the other morning...Jeff has significant anger issues and is highly triggered by his adoptive mother (makes sense). I have been working with his mom to listen and attune and try to understand his thinking. Jeff's mom is a great person and tries really hard. She really likes to talk to him and tries to provide lots of what I would call "life lessons" (she talks too much). Jeff had a major meltdown that morning before therapy over applying sunscreen on his face. Jeff argued and argued about applying this sunscreen and by the time they got to my office... no sunscreen.

I asked mom to just follow my lead on this one. I had him come in and I said to him, "Jeff, tell me the thinking behind the 'I don't need sunscreen' fight. He was very regulated as he began this very long, somewhat complex story. His thinking was so interesting. A simple direction-- "Go put your sunscreen on because you don't want to get sunburned again"--had directly led to the meltdown. I gave his mom a signal with my eyes to let him continue. Jeff told me that he had to sleep in his sister's room a couple of nights ago. He said that his adoptive sister is African American and she puts "stuff" on her hair. I said, "OK, go on." He explained that he slept on her pillow and that "hair stuff" got on his skin and it clogged his pores (he did say pores). He turned to his mom and said, "Mom I don't have a sunburned face. It is acne." Before his mom could interject, I quickly intervened.

I said, "Jeff, what you are saying is that you do not have a sunburn, you have acne." He responded with a very simple yes. I asked him if he had any issues putting the sunscreen on his face for that day, as he was going on a field trip and it was going to be very sunny. He said no.

Mom looked at me with this very befuddled (probably a bit annoyed) face. We went on to finish up the session. I sent a happy Jeff to the restroom to apply his sunscreen and mom said to me, "I just don't get it." I said to her, "Mom, he was trying to tell you that he really did not have a sunburn (even if he did). He believed that his face was irritated due to his sister's hair stuff." I asked her what her goal was with the sunscreen. She said her goal was for him to wear the sunscreen. I replied, "So does it matter whether or not his face was sunburned? He believes that his face was irritated, not sunburned. He just wanted to say what he was thinking." I explained that Jeff does know about sunscreen and the danger of sunburn. I reminded Jeff's

mom that he told us several months earlier that his brain does not think like hers (real statement). My recommendation for her was to listen to his story rather than launching into a lecture. This is something to remember when you work with complex families and children with complex issues and very interesting thinking. Remember to listen....don't launch.

(I think this is going to work at Jeff's house!)