

Trauma Informed Care Series

Module 5

Dealing with Feelings & Behaviors

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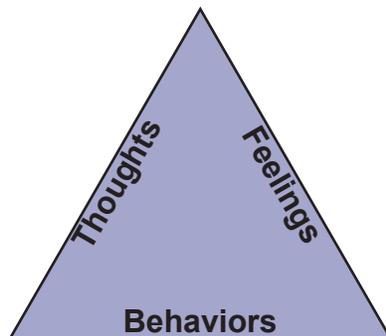
Behaviors—however troublesome and frustrating—are just the tip of the iceberg for children who have experienced trauma. Not immediately visible, or beneath the surface, are feelings, thoughts, expectations and beliefs resulting from their trauma.

The Cognitive Triangle

The relationship between what we think, feel and do is referred to by mental health professionals as the Cognitive Triangle. Each point of the triangle influences and feeds back to the others. Making a change at any point of the triangle will influence the other two.

What we think directly affects how we feel, how we feel affects how we behave and how we behave directly affects our thoughts and so forth. For a child affected by trauma, these emotional reactions and behavior are not calculated and conscious, though often challenging.

- **Thoughts** – Maybe your child has difficulty reading others' social and emotional cues or often view themselves and a variety of situations negatively. They may assume someone or something is always going to hurt them.
- **Feelings** – Youth who have experienced trauma may have trouble understanding and expressing what they are feeling and why. They may be extremely reactive to minor events that can lead to emotional flooding. These experiences are difficult to describe, let alone control.
- **Behaviors** – Your child may be re-enacting experiences from the past or behaviors may have the goal of keeping others at a physical and emotional distance. Many behaviors are how the child perceives they can protect themselves. Sometimes these survival strategies get in the way of learning different skill that allow for developing new, healthy relationships.



Knowing the Cognitive Triangle helps us understand our children's behavior and reactivity AND how it takes time and patience for a child's thoughts, feelings and behaviors to change. Early, traumatic experiences divert typical, healthy development off course.

As safe, consistent caregivers we provide new, positive experiences and relationships that assist the children in our care to develop new brain connections—resulting in the child's ability to more accurately interpret, express and control their emotions and behaviors.

Here's How We Can Help

- Differentiate yourself from the unpredictable, rejecting, angry, frightening or absent others in your child's past.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: Focus on showing instead of telling—show how you are different by choosing a wise, safe response instead of an emotional or gut reaction. Be self-aware and take a moment to calm yourself when you notice yourself feeling out of control.

Remember what you are seeing is only the tip of the iceberg and the behavior you see is a mask of the fear, pain and loss hiding beneath the surface. Finally, when you have remained regulated these behaviors have nothing to do with you. Taking the behavior personally becomes counter-productive.

- Be in-tune to your child and their emotions as you help them define and express what they are experiencing inside.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: Look for the meaning or feelings behind your child's words and actions. Help them to understand these hidden pieces while offering support to help them cool down. Offer a favorite stuffed animal, a cold drink of water, safe space and validate their emotional experience. Take time before dysregulation to "check-in" and allow the child frequent opportunities to assess and express themselves. Most importantly, make your responses consistent, predictable and realistic.

- Model the things you would like to see in your child. Be an example of appropriate, healthy emotion expression and behavior.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: "Clear, calm and consistent" is a great manta for teaching by example. We are not only showing healthy emotion and expression; we are communicating it is safe to express emotions.

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Communicate your own emotions about a situation in a calm, non-shaming manner. Double Dip Feelings is a children's book describing the experience of more than one feeling (sometimes experienced as contradictory) at a time. Help your child to normalize and understand their mixed emotions. For example, feeling both love and anger toward a family member.

- Use a strengths-based approach. Encourage positive emotions and behavior through support of your child's strengths and special interests.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: Catch your child doing good! Look for small things that lead to longer-term change. Give frequent, specific, prompt and genuine praise.

Think of each piece of praise as a new brain connection. Though correction is a necessary part of change, remember to balance at least six praises for each correction. Positive reinforcement is consistently more effective in shaping desired behavior.

Facilitate opportunities for your child to experience success and "do it themselves." Mastering new skills and activities provides reparative experiences needed for healthy brain development.

- Correct negative behaviors and inappropriate expression of emotion in calm, supportive ways while assisting with more adaptive skill building.

THINGS YOU CAN DO: Use a calm voice, calm body language and communicate with intent. Using wordy explanations or focusing on more than one behavior at a time can confuse, frustrate and escalate the situation.

"Experience is Biology...Parents are the active sculptors of their children's growing brains."

—Daniel J Siegal, M.D. & Mary Hartzell, M.Ed.

Choose non-shaming and non-threatening interventions. Threatening removal from the home for inappropriate behavior removes the child's experience of psychological safety, which is necessary for change.

Remember, a child's "developmental" and "emotional age" when identifying natural and logical

consequences. Sometimes being effective means letting some things go.

For example, when a child refuses to clean their room a caregiver may choose to close the door instead of choosing this battle. Help your child to see how their behaviors affect others AND themselves while problem-solving better ways to meet their needs.

Learning the Triggers: "Hannah's" Story

Foster parent "Beverly" was becoming increasingly frustrated and challenged by foster child "Hannah's" out of control behaviors when visiting a neighborhood grocery store.

When visiting other stores, Hannah followed directions, observed limits and stayed close to Beverly for the entirety of their shopping trips. When arriving at this particular grocery store, Hannah would become visibly agitated in the car—talking back and unbuckling her seatbelt before the car had stopped.

After stepping into the store, Hannah would become louder, demanding and wander away from Beverly. Two aisles into their trip, Hannah would begin to yell, fall on the floor and refuse to go any further. With each trip, tantrums became longer and more intense and Hannah would not respond to

prompts, redirection, rewards or negative consequences.

After several failed trips, Beverly stopped taking Hannah with her to that grocery store when possible and chose a different grocery store when Hannah was with her. The tantrums stopped.

About a year later Beverly was talking to Hannah's biological mother "Jenny" after a family visit. During this conversation Jenny revealed that one of Hannah's abusers had worked at a grocery store in the neighborhood—though he had since moved away.

This grocery store was a trigger for Hannah and Beverly's sensitivity to Hannah's needs without a clear "why" resulted in Hannah's experience of increased safety.