

New Responses to Old Behaviors: Therapeutic Parenting for Children Who Have Experienced Parental Loss, Neglect and/or Abuse

Children who have experienced parental loss, neglect and/or abuse need to experience connections, security, warmth and belonging to build and enhance their attachments. Instead, as a by-product of their irritating and sometimes frightening behaviors they frequently experience rejection, anger and the unavailability of their parents. Therapeutic responses to these behaviors must meet the child's unmet needs, teach new skills and *enhance* their connections to their parents.

Many of the behavioral problems that plague parents of children with "special needs" are normal and expectable behaviors at earlier ages/stages of child development. These persistent negative behaviors disrupt family life and tragically distance parents and children. Identifying the age and/or stage of development that a behavior **normally** occurs can help identify the child's unmet developmental needs and the skills that the child lacks to function in age appropriate ways. Often children's behaviors are stuck at an age of development that they experienced a loss or trauma. It is very important to view persistent behaviors as symptomatic of earlier unmet needs. Perhaps more important and practical, the **age that the troubling behavior normally occurs serves as a guideline for developing effective, proactive responses.**

For Example

Lying, even when caught in the act, is one of the most common and persistent behaviors of children who have experienced trauma, neglect and/or losses. Lying when caught red-handed is 'normal' at age 3. Three year olds who tell tall tales are not called liars. They are gently, firmly and repeatedly, taught to tell the truth. Many of the lies of older children, with troubled histories, represent one or more missed developmental tasks of 3 - 5 year olds. Several critical developmental tasks must be in place to enable young children to develop the capacity to "own up to their misbehaviors", admit the truth when they are caught. Children with troubled histories have usually missed one or more of these developmental tasks: the ability to tell fantasy from reality in the face of strong emotions, the awareness that the child does not cause all events in his/her world (decreasing magical thinking) and/or developing object constancy. Object constancy is the experiential faith that the caregivers love, warmth, comfort and security is still available even when the child's behaviors anger the caregiver.

When older children lie persistently, in spite of natural consequences and repeated encouragement to tell the truth, they have usually missed one or more of the developmental tasks that are essential precursors to 'owning up to their mistakes and misdeeds'. Our perceptions of and reactions to children who lie are heavily influenced by our beliefs that older children should not lie. When we step back and look at the persistent lying as an inability to tell the truth similar and related to earlier stages of development our perceptions and reactions to the lies usually begins to change. Understanding the needs that the behavior

expresses mitigates our reactions to the behavior. This is not to say that once parents identify their child's missed stages and unmet needs they will never again experience frustration and impatience with the lying. It is important to map out the goals of parental interventions and to return to those goals when we as adults lose sight of them. Identifying the age that lying is normal, even if it is not agreeable at that age, assists us in drawing a profile of the child's unmet needs, missed stages and missing skills.

Viewing any troubling behavior from the age that it usually occurs alters our perceptions and allows us to: (1) identify what skills the child is missing, (2) identify ways *to teach* the child those skills, (3) develop interventions that meet the child's previously unmet needs.

Changing Parental Responses: What You Have Been Doing IS Not Working!

First, identify the age and/or stage that the behavior is normal. Consult child development books, your social worker or therapist and your memory of parenting normal expectable children. When do children normally tell tall tales when caught in the act or take things that are not theirs frequently, etc. Hint: most all of the most common persistent behaviors of children with a history of loss, neglect and/or abuse are normal sometime between infancy and 4 1/2.

Next, identify the needs, challenges or dilemma that the behavior expresses when it is age appropriate. Think about how you would react to and manage the behavior if the child was chronologically the age that the behavior usually occurs. Using your perceptions and interpretation of the behavior when it presents at the 'normal' age begin to identify ways to meet the child's needs and teach the missing skills while respecting the child's chronological age. Try to identify ways to connect with the child as soon as possible. These children need your love most when their behaviors are the most 'unlovable' !

Be patient with yourself. This technique takes time and practice. Using the troubling behaviors to form educated hypothesis about the child's needs enables you to become much more proactive in your response to the child when the behavior occurs.