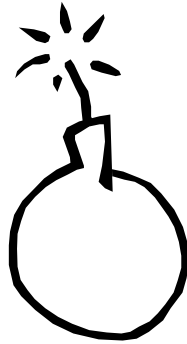




## What Do These Behaviors Mean?

**I**'m a convert!" said one formerly skeptical Wisconsin foster-adoptive parent. "It really is all about fear, and sometimes it really is as simple as asking, 'What are you afraid of?'"

Kim talks about how frustrated she was in not being able to break through her daughter's defiance. Finally one day while driving, she asked her daughter, "You don't act out at school, right? But you do with me. Why is that?" Right away her daughter answered, "I'm afraid that Monique [her daughter's biological mom] is drinking again and if she drinks, she might hurt someone and I don't want her to go to jail."



you with your child's most challenging behaviors.

Heather Forbes wrote about a lot of these behaviors in her book, *Beyond Consequences Logic and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children with Severe Behaviors*.

Here are some different approaches that may help in understanding some of the most challenging behaviors.

### Fear and Stress

Most children lack the words and understanding to identify what they are feeling and what they need. Instead, children may act out when the emotions are too big or scary. Often, the emotion causing the behaviors is fear—triggered especially when too much stress is present. It's hard when your *own* stress level is high, but try to respond to the fear *behind* your child's actual behavior.

The following behaviors are common in children who have had a history of trauma or challenges with attachment. Some behaviors, however, are just ingrained in people—every child is born with a certain temperament and resilience level.

### Aggression

A child displaying aggression can be scary to encounter. Kim says that even though her six-year-old can be completely heart melting at times, the sheer rage continues to amaze her. "It's a shock to hear someone that little and sweet have so much hate directed

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### Not An Easy Fix

As with other parenting approaches, this is not an easy fix. It may not generate immediate results, but over time, it can help



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at you and to have her use the f bomb, threats to kill and gestures that she does. It's hard to think of her as vulnerable."

The aggressive behavior may seem as though it is an attempt to push you away, but at those times, your child needs you the most. Remaining calm is the best thing that you can do. It will help to calm your child and that is probably what he or she wants.

Your primary focus is to keep your child and others safe. Reasoning with your child at this point usually only serves to *increase* the aggression and reinforces the behavior. During times of high emotion, people can't process information very well and thus no learning occurs. Approach the topic later when you and your child have regained composure and are calm again.

### Defiance

When your child defies you, it often triggers feelings of anger in you. Children may be defiant because they're fearful. One of the things they fear most is not having *any* control, and paradoxically, being *out* of control. While it might seem like they're trying to push your buttons (and they can be gifted at this!), defiant children might be trying to gain some control—or push you to be in control.

Some children are also defiant as a way to push you away. Again, there's a paradox of wanting to be loved, but also being afraid to be loved—and thus possibly hurt or abandoned.

Some children are naturally more assertive and ready to speak up than others, and some have learned to be defiant as a survival mechanism. Meet your children where they are by validating their feelings.

For example: *Are you afraid of... you can talk to me about that. I'm not going anywhere.*

Defiance is more likely to happen at certain times, usually during transitions from one

activity to another, such as school time, bedtime and bath time. Remain firm in what you're asking, but don't add consequences to your child or soon you'll be in a lose-lose spiral.

Try not to place demands on your children, but give options like, "When you've taken your meds, then you can leave the table, but do you want to take them before dinner or after dinner?"

### Lying

The child who lies may continue to do so even after he's caught, making the behavior hard to understand. Your child may be lying because he's fearful of something. Our job—and it's not an easy one at all—is to find out what the fear is.

When your child is scared, he won't be receptive to hearing why lying is wrong. Instead, try to reassure your child that you're there for him, even if he's done something wrong. Imagine being a gazelle on the African Savannah, backed up against a wall with a lion staring you down. You would do and say (if you could speak) anything to make the lion turn and leave you alone. Unfortunately, this is how many of our children feel, and they truly believe they must lie to survive.

Lying is often motivated by fear, but sometimes it's also "hard wired" in. In [Deborah Hage's, \*Antecedents to Lying and Telling the Truth\* article](#), she explains that in normal brain development, a baby will be hungry or wet and will cry.

But with some kids who are neglected, the baby doesn't get fed or changed, so he learns to lie to himself. As Hage says, "The internal messages he must give himself in order to survive are, 'I am no longer hungry. I am not cold.' The internal lying messages continue, 'I am not worthy of being kept warm, comforted, held, cuddled, rocked. The world is unsafe. No one

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cares.’ The lies enter his psyche and embed themselves in his brain.”

### Hoarding and Gorging

Hoarding and/or gorging are common among many kids adopted from foster care or institutionalized care. There was usually a time when they didn’t have enough food or have experienced negative events around food.

This behavior is often present for years—even in a place where the child has access to food and where there are healthy rituals around food. Stress, fear and habit all contribute to children regressing to hoarding food.

Tips for helping you deal with hoarding, include:

- Provide access to snacks and food, and reassure your children that there will always be enough to eat.
- Remind your children that they can count on you and that you’ll try to help them “feel full” with their emotional needs.
- Be aware of when and where the behaviors are taking place. This is often when your children are feeling the most stress.
- When you find food stashed in rooms where food isn’t allowed, calmly remind your children where food is allowed.

### Stealing

Children who have spent time in homes without a consistent person to help soothe them, often have trouble soothing themselves. They may seek an external way to soothe, and stealing is one way. This may seem like a strange way to cope, but having the power to control the situation can be very calming to a child who has felt powerless and was used to a chaotic environment.

This behavior can become repetitive because the body becomes used to the relief achieved

### Reminders

#### *We Can’t Really Ever Know*

The late Joel Ungrodt, who founded a foster care agency in Wisconsin, used to stress that, “We often *think* we know why someone behaves a certain way, but we never *really* know.” We can, however, be available to listen and be supportive.

#### *Some Behaviors Aren’t Trauma-Related*

Those of us who are parents and workers in the child welfare field are sometimes quick to make the connection between a behavior and past trauma. While this is often insightful, we forget that lying, being oppositional, bingeing, etc. are behaviors that many kids exhibit, at various stages of development.

#### *Try to Look at Your Child’s “Negative” Behaviors as Gifts*

As Kim says about her daughter, “I look at her athleticism/aggression, defiance and sheer stubbornness and I see some of the very skills she would need to be an Olympic figure skater or some other kind of athlete.”

from stealing. Wait until your child is calm and emphasize *your* responsibility.

For example: *I am the parent and when you steal, it’s my responsibility. Is anything bothering you? Can I help with anything?*

Children may steal things that they don’t even want. They may not hide what they have stolen from you because they aren’t trying to sneak it past you. They simply couldn’t control the urge to be soothed through stealing.

The place that children steal from may give you with insight as to where the child has stress. For example, if they steal from a

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sibling, then perhaps they feel that sibling receives more attention.

### **Fear and Triggers**

When children are already scared and have engaged in one of the behaviors in this tip sheet, you probably won't be able to get through to them. Instead, try to identify what triggered the fear so you can help to reduce it in the future. Once (or perhaps more likely, if!) your children are calm, try to talk to them constructively about why their behavior was inappropriate.

Children often don't consciously know what they are doing at the time they are doing it. If enough fear takes over them, they often go into survival mode. And everyone expresses that differently. Take the time to walk away, calm down, and then return to the situation. Try to develop a plan for what you'll do in the future.

This tip sheet was intended to get you thinking about what might be behind these behaviors . . . but coming up with solutions can be an equally frustrating journey. Please call us at the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families if we can help you with coming up with concrete solutions.



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## Resources

### From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Beyond Consequences Logic and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children with Severe Behaviors*, by Heather Forbes
- *All About Adoption: How to Deal with the Questions of Your Past*, by Anne Lanchon
- *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past*, by Betsy Keefer
- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arletta James
- *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies To Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*, by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.
- *The Yes Brain – How To Cultivate Courage, Curiosity, And Resilience In Your Child*, by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.
- *Never Never Never Will She Stop Loving You*, by Jolene Durrant

### Additional Resources

- [Child Trauma Academy Library](#)
- [The National Children's Traumatic Stress Network](#)

### Tip Sheets

- [Reaching Your Boiling Point](#)
- [Tips for Positive Parenting](#)
- [Is it Grief? Why Challenging Behaviors May Be Signs of Grieving](#)

### From the [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Behavior as Communication](#)
- [When Difficult Behaviors Arise](#)
- [Lying as Trauma –Driven Behavior](#)

### Inspiration & Hope from [No Matter What Families](#)

- [What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean?](#)



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