

Bolstering Therapeutic Strategies for Parents

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Bolstering Therapeutic Strategies for Parents.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to identify and describe specific therapeutic strategies to:

- Assist parents to develop nurturing, trusting relationships with children who have attachment and behavioral challenges
- Provide a healthy balance of nurture and structure in parent-child interaction, and
- Support the development of the child's capacity for self-regulation and healthy coping

1.3 Lesson Overview

This lesson will focus on teaching parents the importance of using therapeutic parenting to help them develop and maintain trusting attachment relationships with children and youth who have negative expectations of caregivers and challenges to attachment.

In this lesson, we will incorporate strategies from TBRI, ARC, and Theraplay that you can integrate into your course of treatment.

1.4 Helping Parents Understand the Need for Therapeutic Parenting

Normally when people think of discipline, they think of punishment or consequences.

Traditional discipline is usually ineffective and often leads to an escalation of conflict. Therapeutic parenting reinforces the reality that "discipline" actually means teaching or learning.

To further illustrate the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline with this population, watch this video from *Trust-Based Parenting*, with commentary by Drs. David Cross and Karyn Purvis.

[Video Transcript]

DR. CROSS: Traditional discipline simply doesn't work with our kids. And punishment is the least effective way to change behavior that there is. And, in fact, it's very often counterproductive. It actually makes things worse.

[ADULT REPRIMANDING CHILD]

DR. PURVIS: Parents who don't understand what's causing the behavior and only respond to the behavior are certain to drive the child deeper into fight, flight, or freeze.

NARRATOR: Instead of faulting your child's behavior, we'll show you how to coach them to replace old strategies with ones that work and to accept their past and how it has shaped them.

DR. PURVIS: We don't want a bunch of head-on collisions. We want them beside us, connected to us, moving.

They have changes in their ability to process their senses. These may be children who push away our hug because they have sensory processing issues. Or they may be overly sensitive to noise or smells or sounds.

[DR. CROSS TALKING TO CHILD]: Any chance I can have a hug? Not today, okay. Maybe on Monday.

DR. PURVIS: These may be children who have lost the ability to trust. A child who has changes in his brain and his brain chemistry from early trauma won't just automatically heal. They need insightful, precise, skillful parenting.

[End of Video]

2. What Happens When Parents Lack Therapeutic Parenting Skills

2.1 What Happens When Parents Lack Therapeutic Parenting Skills

When parents' repertoire of parenting strategies has been ineffective, parents become desperate and engage in more extreme and harsh approaches to win power struggles and exert control. Conflicts reverberate throughout the entire family, creating consequences for all. In some situations, parents' sense of failure and escalating behaviors may lead to parents considering placement disruption or adoption dissolution.

2.2 Cycle of Coercive Parenting

This escalating cycle of conflictual parent-child interaction was first noted by Dr. Gerald Patterson and has been validated in many research studies.

Coercive parenting, characterized by hostile, punitive, and controlling behavior from parents, frequently leads to, or exacerbates, child conduct problems.

A study of over 1,000 adopted and non-adopted adolescents found that parent-child conflict and coercive parenting consistently predict acting-out behavior in adopted adolescents (Klahr, Reuter, et al., 2012).

2.3 Escalating Coercive Discipline

In a study of post-adoption clinical services, over 60 percent of adoptive parents reported using stricter discipline to address their child's problems, but most found this approach unhelpful (Smith & Howard, 1999).

For example, it is not uncommon for families to have motion detectors outside a child's room to prevent running away or avoid harm to siblings, put a lock on the refrigerator to prevent food hoarding, or remove all toys and items of meaning as punishments. Parents become somewhat like jailers for their children.

One therapist reported that after asking the adoptive parents to make a list of just the essential rules so that they could develop a contract with the child, the mom returned with a list of 79 rules! Clearly, that's too many for any child to manage.

2.4 Parental Difficulty with Connecting or Empathizing

As parents continue to be frustrated with their inability to resolve problems, they may lose their ability to empathize with their child and appear rigid and angry when they seek services.

Therapists need to keep in mind that they are probably seeing this family at their worst, and the parents were likely much more empathic, nurturing, and connected before the problems became so severe.

Parents can, and do, become worn down and hopeless, pulling away from the things that hurt them.

2.5 Marital Tension

In two-parent families, there is often conflict between how to handle challenging behaviors, even to the point of one parent wanting to dissolve the adoption when the other parent remains committed.

A key area for therapists to address is the importance of parents presenting a united front and feeling supported by each other, as well as maintaining their couple relationship.

It may be helpful for one parent to reinforce the other parent's disciplinary efforts in the child's presence; minimizing triangulation and manipulation.

Youth often learn to split parents - seeking to manipulate one parent to get their way when the other parent has already said no or set specific limits.

2.6 Sibling Conflict

Other family dynamics, including sibling conflicts may become exaggerated in these situations, and a child who is easily frustrated, aggressive, and lacking social skills precipitates conflicts with siblings.

The energy and parental time devoted to the child or adolescent with challenging behaviors can breed resentment among other children in the home.

2.7 Mother Takes the Brunt of the Youth's Anger

Often the power struggles take place between the youth and the mother, with the youth behaving very differently with the father.

When this is the case, the father may not understand the mom's complaints, and may not be supportive of her, placing stress on the marital relationship.

The need for strengthening the co-parenting relationship is critical when this dynamic occurs.

2.8 Expressing Feelings

As a therapist, you will want to be sensitive to creating a space for the couple to safely express their true feelings at the time, even if it means thoughts of dissolving the placement. This opportunity for parents to work together can actually preserve a placement.

2.9 Parental Burnout

The energy required to manage a child or adolescent with challenging behaviors may mean that little is left for spouses, friends, or even oneself.

Parents may withdraw from outside relationships, because others do not understand and/or because their child may act out in public or engage in behaviors that are socially unacceptable.

When a youth is expelled from their after-school program, not welcome in neighbor's homes, or constantly in trouble at school, it is hard for parents to feel good about the youth or themselves as parents.

As a therapist, it will be important to recognize and acknowledge the isolation, feelings of defeat, and fear parents have that things will not get better and that they are at fault for being ineffective parents.

Stabilizing the parental unit and bolstering their feelings of adequacy will lay the foundation for them to accept and apply the therapeutic parenting strategies we will be discussing in this module.

3. Building a Trusting Relationship

3.1 Building a Trusting Relationship

The foundation for therapeutic parenting is building trust and felt safety.

Let's now discuss strategies for building a trusting relationship.

3.2 Perspective of a Former Foster Youth

Studies of youth in foster care, those who age out of care, and those who are adopted continue to find that unconditional acceptance and commitment in a consistent, stable relationship with a caring adult is the biggest predictor of success for youth.

Let's look at the example of Josh Shipp, a young man who grew up in foster care and experienced multiple traumas, including abuse by foster parents, as well as rape by a foster sibling. He described pushing away any adult in his life who tried to get close. He engaged in externalizing and risk-taking behaviors that got him thrown out of many foster homes. At age 14, he entered a new foster home where his foster parents, Rodney and Christine, refused to give up on him despite his repeated attempts to get kicked out.

After he was arrested and bailed out of jail, Rodney and Christine sat Josh down and told him that they did not see him as a problem, but as an opportunity. This unconditional acceptance and positive perception of his potential was the turning point for Josh.

Unconditional commitment to the parent-child relationship is essential to developing a trusting relationship with a child or teen. Now, we will discuss a number of strategies for building such a relationship.

3.3 Arousal-Relaxation and Positive Interaction Cycles

Remember the arousal-relaxation cycle and positive interaction cycle in the early attachment process? Parents' attunement to the child's needs and consistent nurturing responses that meet those needs are key elements of building secure attachments in early infancy, but the same principles apply with youth of all ages.

It is important that parents be prepared to respond when their children are hurting or needy, even when parents think that their children should be able to manage their feelings. By calming a hurt or fearful child or teen in a nurturing, attuned manner, parents facilitate attachment both for their child and themselves.

The three handouts from the Circle of Security Network in the Resources tab can be used to teach parents about the normal cycle of creating secure attachments as well as the cycle of repair and the cycle of trust.

Click on each graphic in order to zoom in and get a closer look. Click the graphic again in order to zoom out.

3.4 Working with Parents to Build Consistent Response

Building a child's trust through consistent response, following through on promises, and repairing disrupted connections are crucial in changing expectations and behaviors and for building trust and security.

When there is a caregiving network with multiple caregivers, all of them need to work toward consistent, effective responses, individualized to their own child or teen.

Click each shape to learn strategies therapists can use to help parents be more consistent in their response.

1. Providing psychoeducation about parents' triggers and emotions that interfere with consistent nurture and structure
2. Teaching appropriate use of reinforcement and limit-setting
3. Practicing skills through roleplay
4. Coaching in observations of parent-child interactions
5. Modeling response skills

3.5 Repairing Disrupted Connections

Repairing disrupted connections is also a key part of building a trusting, attached relationship, and helps to model desirable behavior for the child in fixing their own mistakes. When a parent loses control and acts in a harsh, punitive manner, it is healing for the parent to repair the rift in the relationship.

Parents need to wait until they are calm, and the youth has had a chance to regroup. The parent may start by acknowledging the specific mistake that they made, and asking the child how they felt about this.

Josh Shipp suggests the following elements for an appropriate parental apology:

- Be genuine
- Make no excuses
- Take responsibility
- Offer your strategy to change
- Don't try to control their reaction

By apologizing for misattunements and inappropriate behaviors, parents model accepting responsibility for their actions, which is important for children to hear and learn.

3.6 Helping a Child or Youth Identify Feelings and Needs

Because youth who have endured trauma or severe neglect usually are not in touch with their feelings, it is important for parents to help their children learn to identify and articulate their feelings.

Click on each photo to learn about various aspects of helping youth identify feelings and needs.

1. Youth often have difficulty accurately reading and understanding the feelings of others and in perceiving links between environmental cues, their own perceptions or internal states, and their feelings. Some may block their emotions or be overly reactive to perceptions of threat or rejection.
2. Parents need to help the youth develop self-awareness, so that they can identify their own feelings and needs. Parents need to communicate that everyone has feelings, and it is alright to express them in a respectful way.
3. As the therapist, you might recommend that parents use a feelings poster or chart in their home. Then, at different times of the day, parents can ask their child to identify how they are feeling. There are many examples of therapeutic techniques or games from ARC and TBRI that you may already use in your practice, including feelings charades, reading books and discussing characters' feelings, therapeutic board games, acting out feelings with puppets, and use of role-plays. Many examples of feeling posters can be found on the Internet for free.

3.7 Disarming the Fear Response

As you remember from earlier modules, chronic stress reactions have affected the child's brain development and neurochemistry to reflexively respond when they feel threatened or stressed.

Before parents can focus on teaching new skills, they need to recognize that when a traumatized child or adolescent feels threatened, hungry, or tired, the primitive brain takes over and executive functions shut down.

They are likely to be in a state of high alert, fidgety, and unable to focus on learning tasks.

Thus, feeling out of balance or stressed may trigger the same level of reaction as extreme terror.

These biochemical reactions reduce a child's or adolescent's ability to cope with the situation.

3.8 Disarming Strategies

Here are some strategies suggested by Drs. Purvis and Cross to disarm the fear response:

- Be consistently responsive to the youth's need to build security. For example, if the child does something wrong you don't send them away from you; you want to reinforce their belonging and create felt safety.
- Get down on a child's level and speak gently and warmly. With an older youth, speak in a calm, rational manner.
- Assess the youth's pattern of when they are dysregulated be able to identify common triggers and find ways to reduce stress. For example, prepare for transitions, give prompts.

- Give choices to enhance their sense of control, for example, "You can have your hour of screen time before you do your homework or after you are finished - it's your choice."
- Give clear, simple instructions in a kind but firm voice. You want a limited amount of verbiage as this overwhelms the child.

3.9 Attunement

An important aspect of this work is for children to feel "felt" by their parents and other caregivers.

Therapists can teach parents to use reflective listening skills to mirror back their child's feelings or needs, to check if their perception is accurate, and communicate their understanding.

This is a first step toward giving youth a voice and teaching them self-regulation skills. One technique used in TBRI is for parents to keep encouraging them to, "*Use your words,*" or asking prompts, such as, "*What are you feeling?*" or "*What do you need?*" so that they can learn to articulate their needs and feelings.

In responding to older youth, parents need to think before they speak and consider whether what they are saying is helpful and kind. They need to be careful not to be accusatory and to ask questions that demonstrate interest and elicit the teen's expression of feelings and thoughts. The parents and teens may then move to strategizing how to manage those thoughts and feelings.

3.10 The Power of Positivity

Adoption experts advise reversing the ratio of positive to negative interactions youth may have experienced in the past.

For example, instead of a ratio of 1:5, or 1 positive interaction for every 5 negative interactions they may have experienced with early caregivers, children need a ratio more like 5:1 (5 positive interactions for every negative interaction) to reverse their negative internal working model, or view of the world.

When parents can offer genuine and upbeat encouragement, the youth will feel safer, less stressed, and more motivated. Parents need to offer valuing statements and affection to build trust and counteract earlier negative experiences.

Valuing statements, such as, "*You're very special to me*" or "*I enjoy doing things with you,*" convey unconditional valuing, in contrast to performance-based praise that is conditional on behaviors. Both are important in connecting with the youth.

3.11 Strategies for Interacting Positively

Click on each number to learn more about strategies you can share with parents to help them interact with positivity.

1. Find opportunities throughout the day to nurture the youth physically and emotionally by empathizing with feelings, sharing fun activities, spending time guiding, listening, talking, and using humor and laughter.
2. To engage a child or youth who lacks trust, parents can use active, intensive means, including high energy, close physical proximity, positive sensory stimulation, frequent touch as accepted, movement, playfulness, and warm nurturance.
3. For example, exuberant encouragement, such as enfolding the youth in a hug as you praise them, reinforces their positive feelings about the relationship and themselves.
4. These activities can be modified depending on the age, readiness, and developmental maturity of the youth, and their trauma and abuse history. Of course, it is important to be aware of any triggers the youth might associate with high energy engagement behaviors.

3.12 Being Tender and Tough While Parenting Teens with Challenging Behaviors

Josh Shipp shares the following messages for parents to share with their children. These messages are important for establishing relationships with a balance of tenderness and structure.

1. I love you.
2. I'm proud of you.
3. I'm sorry.
4. I forgive you.
5. I'm listening.
6. This is your responsibility.
7. You've got what it takes.

3.13 Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses that Encourage Connection

Parents need to use verbal and nonverbal responses that are nurturing and encourage connection and trust in contrast to harsh or threatening responses.

For example, parents need to use a firm but non-rejecting voice tone, non-threatening body posture, and light touch that respects the youth's need for personal space. Parents should get down on their child's level when interacting with a young child. For teenagers, parents can engage in side-by-side activities that can feel less threatening. This, of course, requires that parents manage their own dysregulation, which can be very challenging for parents who already feel overwhelmed. You may need to provide intensive coaching and roleplay to help parents respond appropriately in the moment.

As we have said before, it is important to recognize that different cultures have different norms regarding communication and the expression of emotions and parents need to understand the norms with which their child is familiar, so they do not misjudge their behavior.

For example, a youth may have learned not to make direct eye contact with an adult as a sign of respect. Louder speaking is common in some families and communities, and not in others. These factors need to be considered in shaping the parents' and the youth's behaviors.

3.14 Verbal and Non-Verbal Responses that Encourage Connection Video

The following segment from the *Trust-Based Parenting* DVD explains important characteristics of parents' interactions with their children to encourage them to connect and trust.

[Video Transcript]

NARRATOR: Many children from hard places associate adults with pain and disappointment, so they tend to pull away and avoid people. To counter this, go out of your way to show them affection and warmth.

DR. PURVIS: Some children find that when they come to the mother's tone or the father's tone, it sets them back, and they're not able to go further in their conversations. We have to be approachable, our voice.

[FEMALE-2 INTERACTING WITH CHILD]: That looks perfect to me.

CHILD: Perfect.

FEMALE-2: Perfect. Put it in.

DR. PURVIS: Our body language, our tone.

[MALE INTERACTING WITH CHILD]: You want to color it in with that or with green?

CHILD: With this.

MALE: Okay, just do these two triangles.

DR. PURVIS: The softness of our eyes, even the positioning of our bodies so that we're present and not doing something else and just partly listening. Those are strong messages to a child.

[MALE-2 FEEDING CHILD]

DR. PURVIS: Something that I have asked parents to do is to take a tape player and put it on the kitchen table, tape the breakfast meal. And when the child's gone to school listen to their voice, see if you sound like you're in a business meeting or if you're talking to your six-year-old.

Stand in front of the bathroom mirror and close your eyes and think about maybe some of your last interactions with your child and then start talking. And then open your eyes and see what your face looks like and what your voice sounds like. Become self-aware.

[End of Video]

3.15 Promoting Predictability

Another strategy for reducing anxiety and building trust is promoting predictability. It's important to remember that many children and youth have lived with high levels of unpredictability and uncertainty.

Predictability reduces anxiety and stress about what is coming next. Routines, rituals, and other strategies to structure the youth's environment help to make life more predictable and less threatening to them.

For example, if bedtime is preceded by the same ritual, such as a bath, two bedtime stories, and goodnight kiss, the stress of this transition is minimized, and it is easier for the child to comply.

An adoptive mother struggled to understand her daughter's continuing need for rituals at bedtime. She stated:

"One of the things I didn't expect when we adopted Celia from foster care was her intense need for cuddling and rocking ... and her continued devotion to her stuffed animals ... We adopted her when she was 6 years old ... she's 10 now but still insists on being cuddled and rocked at bedtime ... she can't get to sleep without her bedtime ritual ... one of us has to lay down in bed with her, hold her in our arms, rock her, and make sure her stuffed animals are properly lined up next to her."

For older youth, predictability can be achieved through family contracting that explores the freedoms and important activities that youth value, parental expectations for the child's well-being, and agreed upon consequences for violation of expectations.

For example, a youth who wants to hang out with friends at night will know what the curfew expectation is, as well as the consequences for breaking curfew.

3.16 Transitions

Helping children to manage transitions by announcing transitions in advance and giving prompts to move from one activity to another can reduce feelings of overwhelm and anxiety.

For example, reminding your teenager to turn in their phones before going to bed by providing a prompt 5 minutes before and having a dedicated location for the phone to be charged.

For young children, making up a ritual of transition, such as “good-bye playground” or choosing a stick, leaf, or stone as a transitional object, can also help.

3.17 Celia Reflection

It is often difficult for parents to understand that a child or adolescent's ability to manage uncertainty can persist at different developmental ages and stages, even if successfully addressed earlier.

Consider this clinical scenario.

Imagine you worked with Celia as a child, helping her to manage her anxiety around bedtime. Celia is now 18 and preparing for college. She has begun to show hesitation and fears about this transition and leaving home.

Her parents have noticed some depressive symptoms and anxiety when the topic of college is raised. Concerned, her parents bring Celia back to see you.

In the course of your assessment, it becomes clear that Celia’s symptomatology is directly related to her prior multiple placements, unresolved loss and grief, and fear of losing her parents.

How would you help Celia see the connection between her current distress and her past history?

3.18 Celia Response

You might consider the following:

- Ask her what worries her about leaving home.
- Normalize for her that many other young adults her age who have had multiple placements begin to have reemerging feelings of loss and grief.
- Discuss with her the probable fear that she carries of losing another parent when she goes off to college.
- Ask Celia to identify things that would help her feel safe to transition from home to college.
- Have her parents join the session to reinforce “claiming” of their daughter. They can also reinforce the security of the permanency. They can discuss how Celia’s room will stay the same while she’s at school. They have weekly text communication and set phone times to check in. They provide clarity on the plans for how breaks will be spent and designated visits by the parents.
- Explore whether it might be in Celia’s best interest to first transition to a local college where she could live at home before embarking upon living out of the home and away at college.

4. Techniques for Helping Youth Accept Closeness

4.1 Techniques for Helping Youth Accept Closeness

Youth with early adverse experiences who have not learned to trust may also intentionally avoid or reject closeness and touch. They will need gradual help in accepting expressions of affection.

Now, let's focus on some strategies you can share with parents to help their children accept closeness.

4.2 Activities that Promote Closeness

Activities that promote closeness between a parent and youth include nesting behaviors - times when they bunch together, such as piling on the couch to watch TV or talk, and sharing a tent while camping. Other examples include side by side activities like baking cookies, taking walks, and other playful games or activities that encourage closeness or physical contact.

Activities which involve the parent matching the child's behavior, or the child mirroring the parent's actions, are also good for promoting connection. Similarly, children's imitation of their parent's behaviors plays a crucial role in attachment and in learning. One-on-one activities that require the child to internalize and model the parent's behavior, such as rhymes and songs or games like "Follow the Leader," are especially helpful.

Theraplay also offers many activities for older youth, including scavenger hunts, charades, thumb or arm wrestling, "pillow balance," which challenges a teen to maintain balance on top of a pillow while it is being pulled, and "M&M hockey," where the youth and adult use straws to blow an M&M back and forth between them. Check out *Theraplay Activities for Older Children and Young Teens* in the Resources tab. For other ideas, see, "*Ways to Encourage Attachment*" by Vera Fahlberg, in the Resources tab.

4.3 Initiating Positive Interactions with the Youth Through Play and Joint Fun Activities

It is important for parents to initiate positive, enjoyable interactions with their children.

Click on each box to hear more.

Activities: Encourage parents to engage in activities that are pleasurable to their child, rather than focusing on what the parent wants to do. For example, going to a children's museum may be meaningful and fun for a parent, but way beyond the capacities of a child to sustain their attention and regulate their behavior. Working on a puzzle together or baking cookies may be more appropriate for the child.

Older Youth: For older youth, attending a sporting event together, surprising them with tickets to see their favorite musical group, going hiking, or playing basketball together are examples of bonding activities.

Therapeutic Parenting: Therapeutic parenting maximizes the use of playfulness in interactions. This not only builds attachment, but also helps improve brain functioning, cognitive skills, and social skills.

4.4 Claiming Behaviors

As we have said before, claiming messages enhance the child's sense of acceptance, belonging, and connection and may help the child feel that they are a fully-fledged family member.

Some ways for parents to convey acceptance and belonging to a child include displaying a family picture, putting the child's school work on the refrigerator, and reminding them of similarities to other family members - for example, a statement such as, *"You like ketchup on your pizza, just like your brother."* The resource on *Ways to Encourage Attachment* lists many ways to convey claiming to a child or adolescent.

It also is important that parents ensure that extended family members also claim adopted children. Developing ways to connect the child to extended family members promotes family identity. It is also helpful to incorporate some of the child's past in family customs and family claiming of the child, so that the child's heritage becomes a part of family heritage.

4.5 Reciprocal Claiming

Reciprocal claiming also needs to occur so that the youth claims the family. Both the adoptee and parents need to accept and claim the aspects of each other in developing a sense of belonging.

They also need to normalize differences by respecting and honoring each of their unique traits and experiences. This process may be more complex when children perceive greater difference between themselves and their adoptive family.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Wrapping Up

We have reviewed many strategies for building trust and connection with children and teens who have attachment challenges. It is never too late to build those trusting relationships. While the work can take time, therapeutic parenting strategies can help adoptive parents and caregivers to build trust and connections with their children, foster healing, and advance healthy, nurturing, reciprocal relationships.

5.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

5.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how will you apply these in your practice?

5.4 Journal Response

Click the “Print Results” button to print and save your answers.

5.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have now completed Bolstering Therapeutic Strategies for Parents.

In the next lesson, we will focus on teaching self-regulation skills to children and youth.