

# Using Therapeutic Strategies to Address Challenging Behaviors



## LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

Through no fault of their own, many of these children and youth develop aberrant survival strategies following the loss of their voices. Control, manipulation, triangulation, aggression, and violence are among the most common strategies.

It is only by developing trust and by giving voice that we can empower these children to relinquish such maladaptive survival skills and learn to use words instead of behaviors to get their needs met.

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Harm that has come to children in the context of early adverse experiences needs to be healed in nurturing, caregiving relationships. Traditional parenting and discipline techniques often do not achieve this. Therapeutic parenting strategies address the emotional issues and developmental challenges that often drive behavior problems.

First, clinicians need to help parents understand **why** their children behave as they do and adjust any unrealistic expectations. As parents understand their child's developmental challenges, they can reframe discipline as teaching coping and self-regulation skills.

## Common Dynamics in At-Risk Families



Think of a family whose child is at risk of being placed outside the home. How might the following dynamics inform your work with this family?

- **Severe power struggles**
- **Difficulty connecting/empathizing with child**
- **Marital tension**
- **Sibling conflicts**
- **Mother takes brunt of child's anger**
- **Parental burnout and isolation**

## How Therapeutic Parenting Helps Parents:

The therapeutic parenting strategies in **Lessons 2 and 3** are based primarily on **TBRI, ARC, and Theraplay**. Teaching these strategies to parents can do the following:

- Parents become aware of the dynamics influencing parent-child interactions in challenging situations.
- Parents can be attuned to their own emotions and responses in interactions with their child.
- Parents become attuned to the child's triggers, needs, and feelings.



- Parents connect with their child through respect of their feelings, positive, nurturing interactions, play, praise, and promotion of “felt safety” and secure attachments.
- Parents give voice to the child through reflective listening, verbal empathy, and encouraging children to identify feelings and express their needs.
- Parents balance nurture and structure in their parenting.
- Parents teach children new skills for negotiating relationships and developing self-regulation.



You may want to review resources or links to websites to learn more about TBRI, ARC and Theraplay and how you can use these strategies with families with whom you work.

### Addressing the Needs & Capacities of Parents

Therapeutic parenting stresses the need for parents to come to terms with their own history, *particularly their own parenting and attachment style*. Parents could benefit greatly from developing self-awareness as to their own self-regulation capacities in difficult interactions with their child.

As with Masha’s adoptive mother, some parents fear rejection by the child and are hesitant to respond affectionately for fear of being rebuffed. Others like Masha’s father struggle with being too rigid and harsh.



Review the resource, *Assessing Attachment-Readiness and Capabilities in Prospective Adoptive Parents*.

While this resource was designed for assessing pre-adoptive parents, it is useful for addressing parental issues in treatment. Apply this in your work with an adoptive or foster parent.

### Addressing Deficits in Brain Functioning

Remember that, because of the impact of trauma on brain neurobiology, many evidence-based treatments that rely on cognitive abilities have been shown to be ineffective with children experiencing deprivation and complex trauma.

**Lesson 4** introduces the Neuro-sequential Model of Therapeutics, by Dr. Bruce Perry.

NMT provides a process for identifying the key systems of the brain that are underdeveloped due to past adversity and recommends targeting the neural systems that mediate the individual’s symptom array with therapeutic activities providing patterned, repetitive, sensorimotor stimulation.



Think of a child or youth who is experiencing significant behavioral challenges and who has not responded well to cognitive therapy.

- How might you use patterned, repetitive, sensorimotor stimulation in your therapeutic approach?
- What recommendations might you have for the parents?



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