



FAST FACTS: Problematic Behaviors- Lying, Stealing & Hoarding

Most challenging behaviors with adoptive and foster children are difficult to understand. However, with a good social history of the child's past experiences, it is possible to start to make sense of the behaviors and begin a healing process for the child. Lying, stealing, and hoarding are a few of the most common difficulties adoptive and foster parents encounter and struggle to understand and cope with.

Regulation is a key issue in why children with trauma histories rely on these negative behaviors to manage their environment. Children with neurotypical brains—i.e., brains that have not experienced neglect and/or traumatic events while developing—learn to self-regulate through healthy adult attachment figures who are attentive to their needs. Attentive caregivers teach an infant that the adult is reliable and trustworthy. The child then learns by experience and example to become independent of the adult. Self-regulation is one of the skills the child gains.

Self-regulation can be taught to children who did not have healthy and safe caregivers early on. It takes a lot of time, consistency, and patience on the part of foster and adoptive parents—especially with older children. Caregivers need to become partners with the child, much as they would if the child were an infant, and the child learns to internalize how the "partner" meets their needs, soothes the child, and keeps the child safe. These are things the child likely never experienced in their early life experiences.

How can caregivers begin to establish trust and teach regulation while also working through difficult and challenging behaviors? We can look at each of these behaviors with some suggestions on how to both address the behavior and where it is coming from - to encourage healthy relationship building and to teach self-regulation skills.

Lying

Most children will lie if they feel threatened or afraid. For a child with a trauma history, this stress can overwhelm them. The lying becomes automatic and "crazy", as you catch them in the act, and they still lie about it. Try to consider this an automatic response, a survival response, rather than deliberate lying to "get out of something." The child may be overwhelmed and just trying to manage the situation.

- Stay regulated. When you catch the child lying or suspect they are lying, stay calm and reassure them that everything and everyone is ok, and they are going to be ok too.
- Let the child know you are not mad at them but are trying to understand and help them be safe.
- Many times, a child will lie due to feeling overwhelmed. Help the child regain their own regulation before addressing the concern—deep breathing and/or close contact if allowed by the child. Put the lie aside if possible until regulation is established for adult and child.

- Through consistency in parenting, the child can learn they do not need to lie to be safe and can rely on the caregiver to keep them safe. This may take a long time so be patient, persistent *and* consistent.
- If lying is a significant trigger for you, examine inside yourself why it bothers you so much. Most often children lie to establish their own safety, not to 'get even'.

Stealing

Many times, a child who steals has an overwhelmed emotional system and they are looking to something outside of their body to help them regulate. The regulation they get is not true regulation as it only works until they are out of the situation causing the intense feelings. Most often the things the child steals are meaningless to the child, which does not fit with the "I want it, I take it" thinking that is sometimes connected to stealing. The child needs human connection and trust to relieve the need to take things when they are overwhelmed.

- It is important if you have a child who takes things, especially in stores, that the child is kept close to the caregiver while shopping. The caregiver is essential in recognizing when the child may be becoming overwhelmed. They can then use touch to establish contact with the child to help them regain their regulation.
- If a child steals from a store or a person, it is imperative that the caregiver or parent stands by the child when the item is returned. The child will get enough negative feedback from the person they stole from. They need the parent there as support, to say calmly "yes this is hard," "I'm sorry they said mean things to you." The caregiver becomes the one who is *with* them, in good and bad. The child needs to know they can mess up and the parent will still be by their side.
- Let consequences be natural. Arbitrary consequences will not hold any meaning and will not work. If a friend is angry because the child stole something from them, it is a natural consequence for the child to learn the cause/ effect of their behavior. And hopefully develop some empathy as well.
- While tempting, purchasing the item a child steals—such as a cell phone—will not curb the behavior. Through understanding and teaching regulation, the child will learn the caregiver or parent is there for them. The parent or caregiver being present during these hard times is the best way for the child to heal and establish trust.

Hoarding

Consider first changing "hoarding" to "saving" or "collecting" and it may begin to help you understand. Many, if not all, children who have a neglected beginning will collect things and have an exceedingly difficult time getting rid of anything. A child who has experienced neglect may collect and hide food to assure that they will have 'enough' later.

- When something is discovered such as food in a secret hiding place in the child's bedroom, stay calm and emphasize safety—especially if it is something that needs refrigeration.
- If your child has a difficult time throwing or giving things away, give them time. Pack things away with the child's help in boxes and store in the home somewhere. After a while, go through the boxes together and see if there is anything the child is now able to let go of. It may seem like junk or trash to you but remember this child may have been without anything for a long time. They will cherish things that may not make sense to you—and they may not be able to tell you why yet or ever. They may never believe that they have enough now nor will have enough in the future.
- It is not about you. This is a process for the child. Getting used to having enough will be difficult and take a long time.

- Continue to reassure the child that they are safe, and you will be there for them. SHOW them this is true by meaning what you say and saying what you mean. Be truthful, direct, and honest. Often children with trauma histories are concrete thinkers, not able to pick up on subtle or indirect messages or actions from adults.
- "Punishment" has no place in healing. The child's challenging behaviors are not "bad" or "naughty". They are symptoms of their trauma. Your job is to help them heal the trauma so they can trust and love freely.
- As parents and caregivers, it is our job to make sure our children learn to trust us to meet all their needs – from having enough food to our understanding why that bag of a million 'post-it' notes are devastatingly important to save!

Resources

- [Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control](#) by Heather Forbes
- [Trauma through a Child's Eyes](#) by Peter Levine
- [The Boy Who Was Raised as A Dog](#) by Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz
- [Parenting Other People's Children](#) by John L. Stoller
- [HEALing for Adoptive Families](#) by Brenda Benning
- [Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child \(and You\) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life](#) by Dr Stuart Shanker
- [The 5 Love Languages of Children](#) by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell

Children's Books

- [How Do You Hug A Porcupine](#) by Laurie Isop,
- [The Runaway Bunny](#) by Margaret Wise Brown
- www.americanadoptions.com/blog/

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Brenda Benning, MSW, LICSW received her master's degree in Social Work from the University of Minnesota and has trained with Heather Forbes, founder of the Beyond Consequences Inc., on multiple occasions. She is currently counseling families individually in home and in group settings. Her primary focus is adoptive families with children healing from trauma histories and attachment issues. Brenda and her husband are parenting ten children, nine through adoption, with multiple having diagnosed trauma histories and attachment issues. By using techniques from both "Beyond Consequences" and her own book "Restoring the Hope, Empathy and Love in Adoptive Families," she has been able to assist families and her own children in their healing journey.

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