Module 5: Dealing with Feelings and Behaviors

Illustrations by Erich Ippen, Jr. Used with permission.
Learning Objectives

After completing this module, you should be able to:

- Describe the cognitive triangle and apply it to a child who has experienced trauma.
- Identify at least three reasons why children who have experienced trauma may act out.
- Describe at least three ways you can help children develop new emotional skills and positive behaviors.
Module 5: Dealing with Feelings and Behaviors

Seeing Below the Surface

Child’s behaviors

Child’s feelings, thoughts, expectations, and beliefs

Essential Elements 3 and 4

3. Help your child to understand and manage overwhelming emotions.

4. Help your child to understand and modify problem behaviors.
What If . . .? (Group Activity)

The Cognitive Triangle

Thoughts → Behaviors

Feelings

Trauma and the Triangle

Children who have experienced trauma may find it hard to:

- See the connection between their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors
- Understand and express their own emotional reactions
- Accurately read other people’s emotional cues
- Control their reactions to threats or trauma reminders

(Continued)
Thoughts?  Behaviors?

Feelings?

### Trauma and the Triangle

(Continued)

Children may act out as a way of:

- Reenacting patterns or relationships from the past
- Increasing interaction, even if the interactions are negative
- Keeping caregivers at a physical or emotional distance
- “Proving” the beliefs in their Invisible Suitcase
- Venting frustration, anger, or anxiety
- Protecting themselves

### Decoding the Triangle

(Continued)

Whenever I feel threatened I get this feeling that I want to hurt anybody who might try to harm me and my sister.

I started cursing at the foster mom. I wanted her to lose control. I figured that sooner or later she would say something that would hurt me. I wanted to hurt her first . . .

Later, I felt depressed. I knew I'd acted out of control. When I get angry I don't even realize what I do and I hurt the people around me . . .

I feel sad that I'm not good about expressing myself. I feel like a walking time bomb. I hope I can find a foster mom who can handle my anger, and help me take control of myself.

—A. M.

Are I too angry to love? Represt. Nov./Dec. 2004

Decoding the Triangle (Continued)

What are your child’s . . .

- Thoughts?
- Behaviors?
- Feelings?

Experience is biology . . . Parents are the active sculptors of their children’s growing brains.

—Daniel J. Siegel, M. D. & Mary Hartzell, M. Ed.


How You Can Help

- Differentiate yourself from past caregivers.
- Tune in to your child’s emotions.
- Set an example of the emotional expression and behaviors you expect.
- Encourage positive emotional expression and behaviors by supporting the child’s strengths and interests.
- Correct negative behaviors and inappropriate or destructive emotional expression, and help your child build new behaviors and emotional skills.
**Differentiate**

Take care not to:

- “Buy into” the beliefs in their invisible suitcases
- React in anger or the heat of the moment
- Take behavior at face value
- Take it personally

---

**Tune In**

(Continued)

---

**Tune In (Continued)**

- Help the child identify and put into words the feelings beneath the actions.
- Acknowledge and validate the child’s feelings.
- Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation.
Tune In (Continued)

- Let the child know it's okay to talk about painful things.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences.
- Be reassuring, but be honest.

Tune In (Continued)

Provide opportunities to practice emotional skills in playful, nontoxic ways:

- Feelings thermometer/feelings charts
- Feelings charades
- Other practice activities
- Games and storybooks

Let's Play . . .

What's my emotion?
What happened?  
(Group Activity)

- Why did A. M. react the way she did?
- What did her foster mother do right?
- Have you ever experienced something similar with the children in your care?

[One day] my rabbit died. I started to cry. That rabbit was so small and defenseless. It needed me and I let it die. Then [my foster mother] hugged me. “If that happened to my cat . . . I would feel the same way that you do,” she said. She wanted my rabbit to be buried and offered to buy me another one. That’s how I realized she wasn’t a fake.

I felt different at that moment. It was like she felt the anger that I had inside of me, and was saying that it was OK to feel that way. That it was OK to be sad and for me to let my guard down . . . That it was OK to let someone into my world and let them help me.

— A. M.


Set an Example

Express the full range of emotions:
- Stay clear, calm, and consistent.
- Be honest and genuine.
- Let your child know that it’s normal to feel different (or mixed) emotions at the same time.
Encourage and support the child’s strengths and interests:

- Offer choices whenever possible.
- Let children “do it themselves.”
- Recognize and encourage the child’s unique interests and talents.
- Help children master a skill.
Taking Stock (Group Activity)

Achieving a Balance

- What talents/skills/interests can you encourage?
- Where can you give the child some control?
- What fun activities/interests can you share?
- What kinds of praise would your child appreciate?
- What kind of rewards would be most meaningful?
**Correct and Build**

When correcting negative or inappropriate behavior and setting consequences:

- Be clear, calm, and consistent.
- Target one behavior at a time.
- Avoid shaming or threatening.
- Keep the child’s age (and “emotional age”) in mind.
- Be prepared to “pick your battles.”

(Continued)

**Correct and Build (Continued)**

Focus on helping your child . . .

- Understand the links between thoughts, feelings, and behavior
- Understand the negative impact of his or her behavior
- Identify alternatives to problem/negative behaviors
- Practice techniques for changing negative thoughts and calming runaway emotions

**Dealing with Problem Behaviors (Group Activity)**

- What are the negative effects of this behavior on your child’s life?
- How can you help your child to understand these effects?
- What alternatives can you suggest for this behavior?
- What consequences can you set if the behavior continues?
Module 5

Supplemental Handouts
Tuning In to Your Child’s Emotions: Tips for Resource Parents

As resource parents, we can play an important role in helping our children to understand, express, and regulate their emotions. Here are some crucial dos and don’ts to keep in mind when reacting to—and talking about—children’s emotions.

**Things to Do**

**Validate the child’s emotions**

When your child expresses an emotion, let him or her know that you have heard, understood, and accepted how he or she is feeling. Validating emotions will help your child feel comfortable and secure, and encourage the child to express emotions and have conversations with you about them.

Keep in mind that validating an emotion does not mean accepting a problem behavior (such as hitting when angry or frustrated). You can validate an emotion but, at the same time, set appropriate limits on behavior (“I can tell it makes you really mad when your sister takes your toys . . . but it is not okay to hit your sister.”)

**Be empathetic**

Being empathetic lets your child know that you understand his or her emotion. Try to:

- Take your child’s perspective
- Let your child know you understand the way he or she feels
- Use warmth and affection

Empathy also can be a powerful tool for helping children to recognize the deeper, more complicated emotions that may lie just beneath their initial reactions. As you empathize with your child, try to help him or her to understand the mixed feelings he or she may be feeling, and to make finer distinctions between related emotions such as anger, frustration, disappointment, etc. For example:

Child:  “I can’t do my homework. I’m mad. School is stupid.”

Parent:  “Sounds like you’re getting frustrated with your homework. It is getting pretty hard.”

Child:  “Dad didn’t pick me up this weekend like he said he would. I hate him.”

Parent:  “Sounds like you are really mad at Dad. I wonder if you are also feeling kind of sad or hurt?”
Let your child know his or her feelings are normal

Normalization makes your child feel comfortable with his or her emotion(s). Let your child know that you sometimes feel the same way and that other people do, too.

Example: “I bet a lot of other kids also feel scared when the lights go out in a storm.”

Things to Avoid

Invalidating the child’s emotions

Steer clear of anything that may devalue what your child is feeling, such as suggesting that something wasn’t as bad as the child felt it was (“There’s nothing to be scared of”) or that he or she should have gotten over it (“Big boys aren’t scared of the dark”). Invalidation can make your child feel uncomfortable with his or her emotions and uneasy talking to you about feelings and experiences.

Lecturing or interrogating the child

Before giving advice or explaining the situation, focus on how your child feels. Although asking questions can help you to understand your child’s perspective, bombarding him or her with questions can also move the conversation away from feelings. This is especially true if you focus only on the specifics of what happened (“What did Johnny do?”), as opposed to what the child experienced (“How did it make you feel?”). In particular, avoid questions that are criticism in disguise. (“Why would you do that?” or “What did you do to make Mommy so mad?”)

Telling the child what to feel

“Should” statements can send a message that the child has no right to feel the way he or she does. Avoid saying things that question or doubt your child’s experience (“Are you sure you felt so sad?”) or that tell your child what he or she is supposed to feel (“You shouldn’t be mad at your brother”).

Hanging the child out to dry

When your child shares something emotional, don’t leave your child waiting for a response. Traumatized children, in particular, need reassurance that their feelings are worthy of your attention and care. Even if the timing isn’t ideal, stop and acknowledge what the child has shared, and let him or her know that you are willing to listen.

Criticizing or blaming the child

Avoid statements that blame or criticize your child for what he or she is feeling, even if the child was the cause of the situation.

“Make Your Own” Feelings Chart

Instructions: Look through magazines, or color copies of photos of family and friends, and cut out pictures of faces that show you each of the feelings named below. You will notice there are blank spots for you to add other feelings you would like to include.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happy</th>
<th>Calm</th>
<th>Tired</th>
<th>Sad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worried</td>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>Peaceful</td>
<td>Confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>Proud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurt</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Stressed-Out</td>
<td>Other ________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Module 5: Dealing with Feelings and Behaviors

Additional Resources

Board Games

**The Stamp Game: A Game of Feelings**

(All ages) *The Stamp Game* is an innovative tool for helping people identify and express feelings. The purpose of *The Stamp Game* is to help players better identify, clarify, and discuss feelings. Players will be able to relate more honestly to others as they learn to express feelings. As a result, players become more effective problem-solvers, and the identification and expression of feelings brings clarity to players’ needs, which in turn leads to enhanced self-esteem. The game is a wonderful tool to equalize those who use words as a defense but have difficulty being emotionally honest, and for those who have great difficulty being articulate on any level. Playing *The Stamp Game* is a novel, fun, and meaningful way for players to learn about themselves and each other.

*Available from:*

- Author’s Den (http://www.authorsden.com):
  http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewwork.asp?AuthorID=416
- ClaudiaBlack.com (http://claudiablack.com)
  https://claudiablack.com/toD_products/product.php/15.html
- Mentor Books (http://www.mentorbooks.com):
  http://www.mentorbooks.com/?page=shop/flypage&product_id=3445&CLSN_1012=121536690410128eb1cef1042d75281f
- Self-Help Warehouse (http://www.selfhelpwarehouse.com):

**Emotional Bingo**

(Versions for ages 6–12 and 12–18) Everybody knows how to play Bingo, but this version requires players to identify feelings rather than numbers on their Bingo cards. Ideal for counseling groups or classrooms, *Emotional Bingo* not only helps children learn to recognize various feelings, it also teaches empathy—a trait associated with lower incidence of violent behavior. Game rules provide opportunities for children to discuss their own feelings and to respond empathetically to the feelings of others.

*Emotional Bingo* offers a new, yet familiar, approach to feelings that appeals to kids of all ages. The game includes 32 Emotional Bingo Cards (English on one side; Spanish on the other), a
Feeling Good

(Ages 9–adult) Sometimes we need a little help to feel good about ourselves, whether it’s a compliment from a friend or a kind gesture from a neighbor. And now there’s another source of help: All you have to do is play the Feeling Good game. “Feeling Cards” get players thinking positive thoughts and recognizing what makes them feel bad. “Doing Cards” give players the opportunity to act out feelings through role-playing and drawing. Originally developed to help people recover self-confidence and optimism after traumatic events or situations, Feeling Good encourages players to feel good about themselves by recognizing, understanding, and expressing their emotions.

Available from:

Creative Therapy Store (http://portal.creativetherapystore.com):
http://portal.creativetherapystore.com/portal/page?_pageid=94,54451&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

PCI Education (http://www.pcieducation.com):

Western Psychological Services (http://portal.wpspublish.com):
http://portal.wpspublish.com/portal/page?_pageid=53,70284&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Use Your I’s

(Ages 5–10) Learning to be assertive instead of aggressive can be effective in reducing antisocial behaviors. One of the best ways to teach children assertiveness skills is by training them to use “I-Messages.” An I-Message is a way to express your feelings in a nonthreatening manner by structuring statements in a specific way. When children use I-Messages to express themselves, they are more likely to be heard and less likely to get into conflict.
Use Your I’s is a board game that teaches children (ages 5–10) how to express their feelings without jeopardizing the rights of others. Game cards provide realistic situations that provoke emotions such as anger, guilt, humiliation, happiness, and embarrassment. Players learn to verbally describe their feelings to others and explain why they feel the way they do. Use Your I’s also helps children become comfortable using the first-person pronoun to share their feelings.

Available from:

Creative Therapy Store (http://portal.creativetherapystore.com):
http://portal.creativetherapystore.com/portal/page?_pageid=94,54507&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Western Psychological Services (http://portal.wpspublish.com):
http://portal.wpspublish.com/portal/page?_pageid=53,70404&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Card Games

My Ups and Downs

(Preschool–adolescence) These large (3.5” by 5.75”), colorful cards feature 17 captivating kids who express 34 different emotions. Children can compare their own feelings with those depicted on the cards. This is a flexible tool that can be used in a number of ways: you can play memory games, make up stories, or play a new form of Old Maid (complete instructions included).

Available from:

Western Psychological Services (http://portal.wpspublish.com):
http://portal.wpspublish.com/portal/page?_pageid=53,70356&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Creative Therapy Store (http://portal.creativetherapystore.com):
http://portal.creativetherapystore.com/portal/page?_pageid=94,54487&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Books for Parents

On Building Emotional Skills


Guide for helping children quiet their minds, calm their bodies, and identify and manage their emotions.
On Talking About Feelings


This classic book on communicating with children offers a wealth of clear, down-to-earth advice, including information on how to cope with your child’s negative feelings (frustration, disappointment, anger, etc.), tips for expressing your own feelings without being hurtful, and techniques for resolving family conflicts peacefully.

On Changing Problem Behaviors


(Ages 2–6) Based on more than 40 years of collective research, child behavior experts Rex Forehand, PhD, and Nicholas Long, PhD, have devised a program to help you find positive and manageable solutions to your child’s difficult behavior. Now in a revised and updated edition, *Parenting the Strong-Willed Child* is a self-guided program for managing disruptive young children based on a clinical treatment program.

On Relaxation Techniques


(Ages 5–13) This book equips children with tools to overcome anxiety through the use of music, muscle relaxation, and storytelling to promote learning, imagination, and self-esteem. This fully researched program is used across the country by teachers, counselors, parents, and medical professionals as a preventive tool and intervention strategy. The 66 scripts focus on the following themes: R=Releasing Tension; E=Enjoying Life; L=Learning; A=Appreciating Others; X=X-panding Your Knowledge.

Books for Children

On Trauma


(Ages 4–8) Sherman Smith saw the most terrible thing happen. At first he tried to forget about it, but soon something inside him started to bother him.
him. He felt nervous for no reason. Sometimes his stomach hurt. He had bad dreams. And he started to feel angry and do mean things, which got him in trouble. Then he met Ms. Maple, who helped him talk about the terrible thing that he had tried to forget. Now Sherman is feeling much better. This gently told and tenderly illustrated story is for children who have witnessed any kind of violent or traumatic episode, including physical abuse, school or gang violence, accidents, homicide, suicide, and natural disasters such as floods or fire. An afterword by Sasha J. Mudlaff written for parents and other caregivers offers extensive suggestions for helping traumatized children, including a list of other sources that focus on specific events.

**On Sexual Abuse and Behaviors**


(Young adult) Most sexual trauma survivors find the early adult years crucial for recovery. During this time they have the best combination of motivation, capacity for insight, and support to begin the process of healing. Written by a psychologist who works with sexually abused teens, *It Happened to Me* helps young adults reflect on what happened, examine its impact on their lives, and begin to develop healthy relationships.


(Preschool to third grade [8–9-year-olds]). *The Right Touch* reaches beyond the usual scope of a children’s picture book. It is a parenting book that introduces a very difficult topic—the sexual abuse of young children. This gentle, thoughtful story can be read aloud to a child by any trusted caregiver. In the story, young Jimmy’s mom explains the difference between touches that are positive and touches that are secret, deceptive, or forced. She tells him how to resist inappropriate touching, affirming that abuse is not the child’s fault. The introduction provides valuable information about sexual abuse and guidance on what to do if your child experiences an abusive situation. Jody Bergsma’s gentle illustrations soften the impact of this story; yet this portrayal of a dangerous situation is very realistic. If your child is old enough to sit still and listen to a story, he or she is old enough for *The Right Touch*.


(Ages 9–12) Nine-year-old Jessie’s words and illustrations help other sexually abused children know that they’re not alone; that it’s okay to talk about their feelings, and that the abuse wasn’t their fault. Reaching out to other children in a way that no adult can, Jessie’s
words carry the message, “It’s okay to tell; help can come when you tell.” Please Tell! is an excellent tool for therapists, counselors, child protection workers, teachers, and parents dealing with children affected by sexual abuse. Jessie’s story adds a sense of hope for what should be, and the knowledge that the child protection system can work for children. Simple, direct, and from the heart, Jessie gives children the permission and the courage to deal with sexual abuse.

**On Violence in the Home**


(Ages 3–12) Angry, fearful, and lonely. That’s how kids often feel when their parents fight. Based on a true story, *Something Is Wrong At My House* shows how a boy in a violent household finds a way to care for himself and how he obtains help from outside his home. Designed with two sets of text, one for older children and the other, with illustrations, for the very young. Available in Spanish.

**On Dealing with Feelings**


(Ages 9–12) From a fear of spiders to panic attacks, kids have worries and fears, just like adults. But while adults have access to a lot of helpful information, that hasn’t been true for kids—until now. Drawing on his years of experience in helping children deal with anxiety, James Crist, PhD, has written a book that kids can turn to when they need advice, reassurance, and ideas. He starts by telling young readers that all kids are scared and worried sometimes; they’re not alone. He explains where fears and worries come from and how the mind and body work together to make fears worse or better. He describes various kinds of fears and suggests 10 Fear Chasers and Worry Erasers kids can try to feel safer, stronger, and calmer. The second part of the book focuses on phobias, separation anxiety, OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), and other problems too big for kids to handle on their own, and explains what it’s like to get counseling. Includes a special “Note to Grown-ups” and a list of resources.


(Ages 3–9) This six-part series acknowledges specific feelings and offers children several ways to deal with them. Each book features a choose-your-own-adventure format, and shows what different outcomes of choices might be—allowing the children to back up and try another solution if they don’t like the outcome, or to try a variety of choices to see how each might turn out.
I'm Furious—When Matt’s little brother ruins his best baseball card, Matt wants to “knock him flat.” Readers will identify with Matt’s feelings and can help him choose a better way to handle his anger.

I’m Scared—Tracy is terrified of the new neighbor’s dog and needs help deciding what to do about her feelings. Children learn several strategies for coping with fear in positive ways.

I’m Excited—Annie and Jesse are super-excited because it’s their birthday. Young children will love helping the twins find activities to release their energy on this special day.

I’m Mad—When rain cancels a long-awaited picnic, Katie decides to be mad all day. Readers help her find other ways to express herself as she moves on to fill the afternoon with fun and laughter.

I’m Frustrated—Alex just can’t seem to skate as well as his older brother and sister can, and he thinks about smashing his skates. Readers help Alex find better ways to express his frustration and find other fun things to do.

I’m Proud—Mandy learns to tie her shoes, but no one seems very excited. Children learn to deal with put-downs by choosing from a multitude of options to help Mandy value her own achievements.


(Ages 6–13) This accessible little book is designed to help children and adults alike understand and deal with children’s anger. Includes activities and information to help children understand and manage their anger, and to relate creatively and harmoniously with the people around them.


(Ages 3–8) Penelope Penguin is a good student, a great diver, and a terrific friend. But she frequently gets angry and can’t seem to control her temper. In this charming and informative book, Penelope learns new anger control techniques that help her control her temper, achieve her goals, and keep her friends.


(Preschool–grade 3) Little children love stories, and this charming book presents 26 of them—one for each letter of the alphabet. In the first story, Anton Alligator shows readers what it’s like to be angry. Next, Bertha Bear illustrates bullying. Then Carlos Camel demonstrates the fine art of chilling out. Continuing through the letter Z, these stories help youngsters understand anger and explore
appropriate responses to it. Younger children can have fun coloring the pictures, while older kids can add speech balloons. Each story is followed by discussion questions and related activities. This little book is a great introduction to anger management.


(Ages 8–12) With a user-friendly layout and whimsical illustrations, this little book gives kids: five steps to taming their tempers; six ways to solve anger problems; clues to anger “buttons” and “warning signs”; tips for using “anger radar”; and steps to take when grown-ups get angry. Also included are an Anger Pledge, a message to parents and teachers, and a helpful resource list.


(Grades 4–12) This book is written directly for children. Humorous and challenging, this popular book invites kids to look at what causes their feelings of anger, change the way they think about it, and calm themselves down. Written in a brisk, conversational style that kids enjoy and understand, this little book really seems to work by giving youngsters the tools to solve anger problems on their own.


(Grades 4–12) This follow-up to the original *Hot Stuff* is written directly for children and describes ways in which anger can cause problems in their lives. Exercises in the books are designed to help children think clearly and be less hostile. This book also contains information on managing stress, which is an important part of any anger management program.

**On Changing Problem Behaviors**


(Ages 4–7) Part of Free Spirit Publishing’s Best Behavior™ Series, this classic helps young children understand that violence is never okay, that they can manage their anger and other strong feelings, and that they’re capable of positive, loving actions. Made to be read aloud, *Hands Are Not for Hitting* also includes a special section for adults, with ideas for things to talk about and activities to do together.

(Ages 1–3 and 4–7) Part of Free Spirit Publishing’s Best Behavior™ Series, *Words Are Not for Hurting* helps toddlers and young children make the connection between hurtful words and feelings of anger, sadness, and regret, and teaches them to think before they speak, then choose what to say and how to say it. It includes activities and discussion starters that parents can use when working with children. (Available as a board book for toddlers.)


(Ages 1–3) Part of Free Spirit Publishing’s Best Behavior™ Series, *Feet Are Not for Kicking* helps little ones learn to use their feet for fun, not in anger or frustration. This book also includes tips for parents and caregivers on how to help toddlers be sweet with their feet.


(Ages 1–3) Part of Free Spirit Publishing’s Best Behavior™ Series, *Teeth Are Not for Biting* explores the reasons children might want to bite and suggests positive things children can do instead. This book also includes helpful tips for parents and caregivers.

Inclusion of any item on this list is not an endorsement of any product by the NCTSN. Product descriptions are based on information provided by the publisher or manufacturer, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the NCTSN.