

## 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 being unable 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.”

Kim was stunned. She had no idea how much her daughter still thought about her past and how scared she was to have someone she loved potentially be incarcerated.

Moreover, Kim was surprised that there was no real link to the “why” behind her daughter’s behaviors and fears. Like most of us, Kim was taking her daughter’s outbursts personally.

While Kim says she was glad for the immediate breakthrough in that incident, she also admits that it wasn’t the cure-all she was hoping for and didn’t always have the same results in other attempts.

### Not An Easy Fix

As with other parenting approaches, this is

not an easy fix. It may not generate immediate results, but it can help you with your child’s most challenging behaviors over time.

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

Here are some approaches that may help understand 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. However, some behaviors are ingrained in people—every child is born with a certain temperament and resilience level.

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### Aggression

A child displaying aggression can be scary to encounter. Kim says that even though her six-year-old can sometimes be completely heart-melting, her rage amazes her. “It’s a shock to hear someone that little and sweet have so much hate directed 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 like an attempt to push you away, but your child needs you the most at those times. Remaining calm is the best thing that you can do. It will help calm your child, which they probably want.

Your primary focus is to keep your child and others safe. Reasoning with your child at this point usually only *increases* the aggression and reinforces the behavior. During times of high emotion, people can’t process information very well; 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 force 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, 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 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 easy—is to discover the fear.

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, many of our children feel this and genuinely believe they must lie to survive.

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

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But with some kids who are neglected, the baby doesn't get fed or changed, so he learns to lie to himself. Hage says, "The internal messages he must give himself 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 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 experienced adverse 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 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* permitted.

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

For example, *I am the parent, and it's my responsibility when you steal. 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 children steal from may give you insight into where the child has stress. For example, if they steal from a sibling, they may feel that the 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 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.

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This tip sheet was intended to get you thinking about what might be behind these behaviors...but coming up with solutions can be equally frustrating. Please call us at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center if we can help you with coming up with concrete solutions.



## Resources

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

- *Beyond Consequences Logic and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children with Severe Behaviors*, by Heather Forbes
- *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.

### Tip Sheets

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

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

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

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

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

### Additional Resources

- [Child Trauma Academy Library](#)
- [The National Children's Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- *Raising Kids with Big, Baffling Behaviors: Brain-Body-Sensory Strategies That Really Work*, by Robyn Gobel