

Support Group Discussion Guide: **Big Behaviors**

**The
Coalition**
for Children, Youth & Families



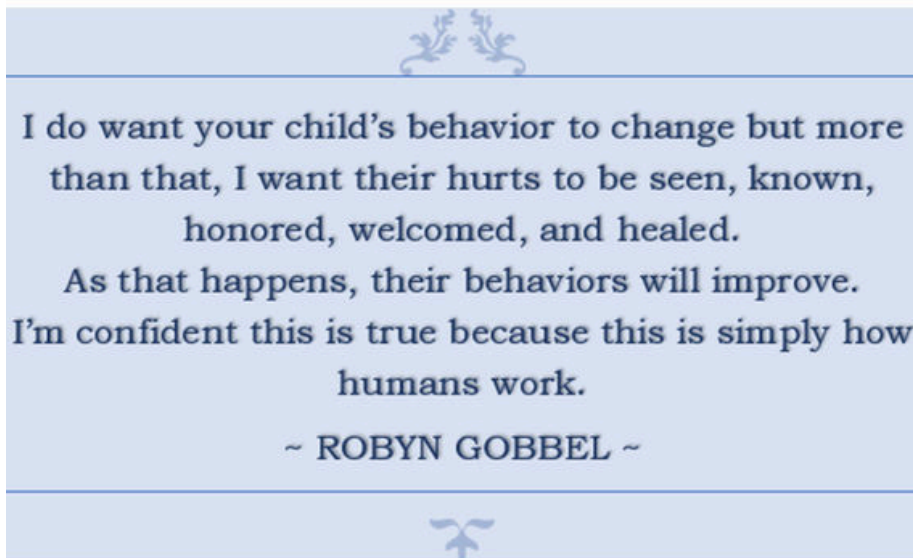
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We thank them for their generosity!*

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Purpose

The purpose of this session is to remind us that our efforts matter, even when it feels like they don't. When we better understand the behaviors the child in our care is exhibiting, we take it less personally and are better able to recognize progress. Focusing on those victories, no matter how seemingly small, keeps us motivated and encouraged in the midst of the challenges.



The hope is that this discussion guide will provide prompting for safe and non-judgmental exploration of issues we're facing and help give voice to the very real, normal, and understandable feelings we all struggle with. You are encouraged to share your stories of successful strategies you have discovered and resources you have used, as well as the progress you've celebrated.

Ice Breaker #1



We See What We Are Looking For (5 minutes)

Give participants 30 seconds to scan their surroundings and take note of everything that is blue. When the 30 seconds are up, ask them to close their eyes and name all the things in the room that are blue. Then ask them to name all the things that are **GREEN**. They will likely have difficulty naming the green things because they were focused on looking for blue.

Objective:

The objective of this icebreaker is to illustrate that we see what we are looking for. If we can stay focused on taking note of the child's strengths and "small victories," we will begin to see and experience more of them.

*For a group larger than eight, breaking into smaller groups is recommended.

Ice Breaker #2



What Are Your Child/Youth's Greatest Attributes? (20 minutes)

Ask participants to share some of the child's greatest strengths and things they love and admire most about them.

An Example:

"I love that my 11-year-old niece is very strong-willed and brave. She is the first to stand up for kids at school who are being bullied. She will speak up, even when it's really hard. Last week her gym teacher made fun of a classmate's weight, and the whole class laughed. She called him out on it and told her classmates they should be ashamed for laughing. She also let a trusted teacher know what happened. The gym teacher apologized in the next class."

Objective:

The objective of this icebreaker is for caregivers to take time to reflect on the things they love about the child(ren) in their care. This can sometimes get lost during challenging times. Often the same qualities we find challenging (i.e., "strong-willed") are strengths when reframed.

When the child/youth is presenting with challenging behaviors, remembering they are trauma-driven and do not define the child's true character can go a long way in helping them heal (and help us cope).

*For a group larger than eight, breaking into smaller groups is recommended.

Introduction to Topic

Seeing big behaviors? You're not alone.

Parenting children or youth who have been uprooted from their parents and home is hard, even when they are placed with a loved one. Not only are the kids trying to manage the uncertainty of their situation, but there is also the underlying trauma that caused the separation in the first place.

This major disruption will impact every aspect of their lives; their thoughts, feelings, *and behaviors*. The resulting “big” behaviors can be overwhelming for both the child and the caregiver.

This can lead to a continuous cycle of kids feeling bad about themselves and caregivers doubting their ability to help them heal.

In the video included in this session, foster parents Stephanie and Jermaine discuss feeling so overwhelmed by the big behaviors they were unable to see the difference their care was making in the lives of their children.

In this session, we will explore the dynamics impacting behavior when a child/youth enters our care. The reminder that these behaviors come from a place of trauma, hurt, loss, and fear can help us stay focused on seeing the small everyday victories that offer hope.

Objectives

This session will help us better understand:

- No matter what circumstances a child is experiencing, it is normal for them to have difficulty coping with feelings of loss and separation.
- Understanding the “why” behind behaviors can help in developing coping strategies.
- Defining the child by strengths rather than the current trauma-driven behaviors can help both the caregiver and child better cope.
- No matter how much you love the child in your care, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility and question if you can do it.
- If you focus on and celebrate the progress and victories, no matter how small, you'll begin seeing more of them.
- You CAN do this.
- Help is available.

No Matter What Video: Small Steps Make Big Gains

When we're immersed in the difficult responsibilities of caring for one or more child who has experienced trauma and separation, it's sometimes hard to recognize the progress that is being made.

In this video, foster parents Stephanie and Jermaine discuss the types of behaviors their children have exhibited as a result of their trauma—and how easy it can be to get discouraged when we're not recognizing the slow but gradual progress on the way to healing.



<https://youtu.be/5ix9fg78EEk>

Click link to play video

Small Steps Make Big Gains Discussion Prompts

Reactions

1. Are there any thoughts, feelings, or reactions this video clip brought up for you?
2. Can you relate to what Stephanie and Jermaine describe?
3. Like Stephanie, have you had moments of doubt about your ability to help the child(ren) in your care?
4. Have you had opportunities to express these feelings in a safe, supportive space?

Challenges

5. How much did you understand about how trauma and separation impacted child behaviors when you became a relative/kinship caregiver?
6. Has your relationship changed with the child/youth you are caring for since you became the primary caregiver? For better or worse?
7. What would be helpful for you in helping the child(ren) work through the trauma and separation?

Strategies & Success Stories

8. What strategies and tips can you share that have helped you better manage the challenges you've encountered?
9. What are your coping methods for working through "big behaviors?"
10. Are there resources you've found helpful?
11. Do you have a story to share about the progress you've made that you're particularly proud of?

Suggested Strategies for Changing Thoughts

Behaviors can't change as long as the thoughts that propel them remain. Below are some strategies for helping the child/youth in your care develop more productive and healing ways to cope.

1. Determine triggers. Do the outbursts happen at dinnertime? Bedtime? Get curious and look for patterns and possible triggers. This will help you to see the behavior coming and address the cause ahead of time.
2. Offer reassurance that it is not their fault.
3. Help give them language to express how they are feeling. Name the feelings. *(See the Thoughts, Feelings, Actions Worksheet in the Resources section.)*
4. Acknowledge you know they are hurting.
5. Provide an outlet for expressing feelings—writing, singing, dancing, exercising, or going for a walk.
6. Help them be aware of negative self-talk and counter it with positive affirmations (e.g., I control my thoughts and I choose not to feel bad by thinking _____).
7. Emphasize their strengths and lovable aspects to help them see themselves from a new, positive perspective.
8. Give them an affirmation to repeat when they feel negative thoughts creeping in (e.g., I am safe and I am loved).
9. Help them to understand their current situation in an honest but age-appropriate way. This prevents them from filling the gaps in their understanding with thoughts and beliefs that may not be true or healthy.

Activity: Breaking the Cycle

Activity:

Every behavior, whether we are aware of it or not, is preceded by thoughts (and feelings). If we can change the thought, we can impact the behavior. The table below provides some examples of thoughts the child in your care may be having that are leading to unhealthy coping behaviors.

Thought	Behavior
I'm betraying Mom if I'm happy here at Grandma's.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refuses to comply with Grandma's requests
When I tell the truth about things that have happened, my family is pulled apart.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lying• Refusal to speak• Self-blame and self-hatred leading to destructive behaviors
My bad behavior is the reason why I was removed. If I'm bad here, they will send me back home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creates chaos and destruction in caregiver's home
I am not safe. I need to have my guard up at all times or I'll be hurt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical aggression with caregivers or others in the home
Something bad will happen to Mom if I'm not there to take care of her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Running away• Expressing anger at caregiver who is "keeping" them from home

Resources

From the Resource Library

- Virtual Resource Kit: Looking at Challenging Behaviors via a Trauma-Informed Lens
 - (<https://wifamilyconnectionscenter.org/library-assets/virtual-resource-kit-looking-at-challenging-behaviors-via-a-trauma-informed-lens/>)

Additional WiFCC Resources

- Find Resources & Support as a Relative Caregiver
 - (<https://wifamilyconnectionscenter.org/how-do-i/find-support-as-a-relative-caregiver/>)
- Wisconsin Kinship Navigator Guide
 - (<https://wifamilyconnectionscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/kinshipnavigatorguide7finalweb.pdf>)

Additional Resources

- How Children Blame Themselves for #traumatic Events
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtgF1R5upPU>)
- Disruptions in close relationships: How they affect a child's behavior, thoughts, and feelings
(<https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/grandparenting/files/2011/03/B3786-41.pdf>)
- Insight Into Common Foster Child Behaviors
(<https://www.pathway.org/blog/common-foster-child-behaviors/>)
- Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions Worksheet
(<https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/cbt-for-kids>)
- Wisconsin Kinship Navigator (<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/kinship/navigator>)
- Grandfamilies.org (<https://www.grandfamilies.org/>)
- Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-kinshi/>)
- Wisconsin GrandFacts State Fact Sheet 2021 Update
(<https://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/State%20Fact%20Sheets/Wisconsin%20GrandFacts%20State%20Fact%20Sheet%202021%20Update.pdf>)