

Therapeutic Conversations Addressing Specific Issues Looking for and addressing the child's positive strivings

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Lying

Lying is not so much an issue addressed in therapy as it is a parent coaching issue. Teaching parents how to handle lying without becoming angry, even having fun with it, is important to changing the dynamic of the child using lying to control his parents. Insight to why the child lies can be addressed in therapy but actually changing a child's lying is by working with the parents to develop techniques that diminish the power of lying. (Read chapter “Antecedents to Lying”)

Parents can become extraordinarily upset when their child lies to them. However lying to the parents is the most victimless of behaviors. Yet, parents go down again and again with, “I don't know how to love someone I don't trust.” That is a mind set that can and must be changed! It makes love conditional, which is a total relationship breaker if it is between a parent and child. It is imperative one trust one's spouse. However, trusting your child is something the child earns. Parents can, and must, adapt their thinking so they can love a child they do not trust one bit. It is not reasonable for parents to demand a child change deep seated behaviors that are not working for the child when they are not willing to put in the work of changing some of their deep seated parenting ideas that, also, are not working. Earning the parent's trust is the child's problem as not being trusted prevents the child from participating in a great many life experiences so parent interactions around lying must make it clear it is the child who is being affected not the parents.

Again, all behaviors are considered within the bounds of “normal” at some age. Lying is a “toddler” behavior so thinking of it as immaturity helps parents to not get sucked

in. Just as they would not get sucked in if a two year old said their diaper was not poopy when it was. No big deal....just act out what the truth is, in this case....change the diaper..... and keep on loving the child.

Coaching parents to find easy outs is essential. They must stop asking questions as they put the child in a position to lie. If parents know the answer, they must not ask as that sets up the child to lie again....reinforcing the neural pathways that need to be diminished! If parents don't know the answer, they must not ask as they won't believe the answer anyway. So regardless, whether or not parents know the answer.....DON'T ASK.

Instead make positive statements:

We need to change your diaper.

I hope you did your homework.

You only need to brush the teeth the teeth you want to keep.

The lamp is broken and you were near it last.

In therapy, ask the child to think of three times they told the truth. If the child can't think of them then the parents can remind them of times they told the truth. "When I asked you if you wanted ice cream did you tell me you did? Right, you told me the truth."

Once telling the truth has been established as the norm then the child can be asked what lies were told. If the child does not think of any tell them they can do 10 jumping jacks and borrow their parents brain. The child can then turn to the parents and ask the parent what lies he or she told. Ask the child what happened due to the lies, what was the consequence? If the child does not answer it is not a problem. Ask them to do 10 jumping jacks and borrow their parents brain. They can then ask the parent. Explain to the parent why the child lies, drawing on the information in "Antecedents to Lying". Talk to the parents in simple terms knowing the child will listen when adults talk.

Coach the parents in avoiding asking questions and making statements of what they believe instead. For some parents lying is treated as a personal attack instead of a child's inability to trust the truth "will set them free." Many parents become anguished over their child's lies and dig themselves in deeper and deeper emotionally. It is often more difficult to diffuse the parents pain and parental refusal to change failed parenting interventions about the lying then to diffuse the lying itself.

Lying, for some reason, is the last behavior to be extinguished in children as they begin to make healthier and happier choices. Be prepared to be in it for the long haul or else set the subject aside, trusting as the child becomes healthier and happier they will stop lying of their own accord.

It is helpful to double bind the child over lying. Tell them it would be better if they kept lying so that when they stopped lying it would be a way to tell their parents they were ready to become healthier and happier. As long as they are lying then parents know they are still emotionally stuck in their abuse and neglect and will continue to help them with it.

Another conversation for parents to have...over and over again!

"Honey, do you think I believe you? Well, I don't. But the good news is if you are telling the truth and I don't believe you, whose problem is it? Mine! And I will then make it up to you. But if you are not truthful and I don't believe you, whose problem is it? Right! Yours."

Lies Children Tell Themselves

Far more important therapeutically than lies the child tells others are the lies the child tells himself.... lies about worthlessness, being unloved and unlovable and other messages from when the child was internalizing the meaning of traumatic experiences. For

many children who did not receive the internalization of a loving mother's voice at a critical stage of brain development, the voice they hear inside is their own. In the absence of a loving external voice the child's own internal voice takes over and it is very powerful, far more powerful than the later addition of a mother's voice, no matter how loving. Overriding the child's negative internal voice requires both therapeutic insight and parent coaching.

CBTWTBTTTWT

A conversation easily woven into numerous interactions with child begins with, "Is there the possibility that your brain is playing tricks on you?" This can be applied to whatever the child is misinterpreting due to early history.

Lie 1 – "I do more wrong than right."

There is no child who does more things wrong than right. The things they do right are endless, yet parents lose track of them in the light of what the child does "wrong". Highlighting what a child does right is important and is a good way to start every session....before the parent launches into a litany of wrong doing. It is harder for a child to remember and relate 3 things they did right than 3 things they did wrong as parents tend to point out the wrongs repeatedly. The right is ignored, primarily because it is taken for granted. Huge numbers of day to day activities are performed correctly by the child. Getting dressed. Buckling their seatbelt in the car. Standing in line at school. Writing their name correctly on their assignments. Using a fork appropriately when eating. Etc, etc. The list of things the child does right must be so long that the list of things the child did wrong is short by comparison. It is important for the child and the parents to understand the child is a good child, who occasionally does things immature and wrong rather than a naughty child who occasionally does things right. Putting a child's misbehavior in perspective of the 24 hour day and 7 day week is important for the child to not become discouraged. Discouragement leads to helplessness and hopelessness, which is counter productive to happiness.

Lie 2 – "I am worthless"

Children who act as if they are worthless do poorly in school, do not take care of personal hygiene, become immune to consequences as they believe they are worth being punished, destroy their toys/clothes/belongings, sabotage fun times, etc. They set parents up to punish them so their external world matches their internal operations. Sticker charts and other incentives often are controlled by children to prove their own worthlessness.

The therapist goes over the child's behaviors, giving them a rationale by going over the child's early history in light of their sense of feeling worthless, pointing out all the ways different traumatic, abusive, neglectful events in their life make it only natural that they would feel worthless. Naturally, they would act out their feelings of worthlessness by engaging in the described behaviors. Asking the question of where those feelings came from may elicit only a shrug of the shoulders. The therapist can then gleefully jump in with, "This is your lucky day. As a happiness coach I am going to tell you."

For example....

The conversation proceeds with the therapist pointing at some object....a wall, a pillowand asking the child what color it is. They state the color. Asking the parents what color the object is gets the same response. Ask the child what other people in their lives is important to them and what color do they think those others will say the object is. Having determined that the object in question is red, for example, the next question is,

“What if your birth mother walked in the room right now and said the color was blue. Would you believe her? She (If I know the name of the birth mother I call her by name) walks in and says, “Honey, all of these people are wrong. That is not red. That is blue.” What do you think? Typically the child will answer that he/she would not believe her. I protest, “ But of course, you would have to believe her. You believe what she has told you about other things. You believe her message to you of being worthless, not worth feeding, not worth keeping clean, etc, . You keep her message to you in your head even while your mom, dad, (keep naming others in the child’s life) have told you over and over again that you are lovable and worth keeping clean, being fed, etc. Why would you believe your birthmother (name) about such an important issue as to whether or not you are loved and lovable and you would not believe her about whether or not the wall (object) is red? Your mom (list all of the people who know and love him, teachers, members of congregation, pastor, etc) and everyone else all treat you with love and respect, kindness and generosity and yet, you listen to your birth mother’s voice in your head telling you that you are not worthy. What is up with that?

Substituting the actual trauma and the internalized message from it is the task of the therapist.

Additionally.....”Is there the possibility your brain is playing a trick on you about this?.”

Lie 3 – “I don’t love my mother.”

Most children who appear emotionally detached from their mother, treat her badly, rant and rave at her, hit her, etc may actually secretly love their mother. However, their fear level of being abandoned again (or hurt/traumatized again) is such that they don’t want anyone to know they love their mother. It is sort of a deep, cosmic secret where they don’t want to admit the truth even to themselves. If they admit they love her and want to be in relationship with her and she leaves, or is unable to keep them safe, it would be more than the child could bear. I always operate under the assumption the child loves his mother but doesn’t want her to know it. Or , loves her but due to past experiences he does not trust her to keep him safe. He wants her attention but can’t handle it if it is loving so he puts mom in the position of always disciplining him in order to get his relationship needs met. It is sort of like the little boy on the playground who thinks he is in love with a classmate and he teases and bullies her mercilessly. Fear keeps children from honestly relating to the mother they love.

In therapy I ask the mother to tell the story of how she fell in love with her child. I list for her the things the child has done to push her away and ask her after each event, “Did you still love him after that?” It is fine for mom to honestly say,

“I was very angry at him. I am sorry I yelled at him. However, I still love him.”

“ I am not sure that others would be able to love him after being hurt like that, but I do.”

“Even if he can’t live with me because he hurts me so badly I would still love him wherever he is.”

(This is very tricky ground! It is not healthy for a child to believe that people who love each other are abusive to each other. It sets the child up for untold pain in future familial relationships to make it OK for people who love each other to be mean to each other.)

Questioning mom about what she does when she is angry at him....yells, swats, whatever. Confirm with child if what mom is describing is accurate. Asking how often that

happens.....daily, weekly, rarely. Confirm with child what his/her impressions are of the frequency. This is a good example of therapy being absolutely and brutally honest. If we want the child to have any chance of taking responsibility for what he does to hurt his mom we must make it unequivocally clear that mom will be honest with him and the therapist in way she has hurt him! If the therapist pussy foots around this issue and helps a parent pretend in therapy that all behaviors are met with calm equanimity then the child will pussy foot around his issues and also engage in denial! If there is the possibility that mom divulging the extent of the ways she has angrily lashed out at her child will be destructive then it needs to be dealt with before the child comes in the room. If it is severe enough then parents need to engage in therapy of their own. A child rarely becomes more emotionally healthy than his parents.

If mom describes her outbursts as being more severe or more frequent than the child describes them it is an opportunity to affirm that the truth is not only OK in therapy, it is absolutely essential. If the child describes them as being more severe and frequent than mom states then that is an issue to be addressed as well. It is an opportunity to talk about how brain wiring for trauma can make the brain over reactive to minor events. Such as when a child is asked to take out the trash and goes berserk. Relating those times of over reactivity to the child in a compassionate, dispassionate way is important in order to avoid putting the child on the defensive.

If divorce, adoption and foster care are issues, talk the child through the events that led to the disruption of his birth parents parental rights. Compare the abuse and neglect the child suffered with his bio parents to the abuse and neglect the child is suffering in his current home. How do they compare? Talk about the good things his birth parents did for him. Contrast and compare that to the good things his adoptive parents do with and for him. Which is overall more loving?

It then follows to ask the child about other loving things his mother does for him....laundry, meals, help with homework, take to games, etc. Contrast that with what she has done that has hurt him. Ask the child whether or not he sees his mother as overall more loving or overall as hurtful. Most children has no trouble relating that their mother is overall more loving than hurtful. Pursue this with questions around all the ways his mother has loved him and hurt him compared to all the ways his birth mother loved him and hurt him and see which mother was more hurtful and which was more loving. Wonder aloud if he is punishing his mother for things his birth mother did to him....abandoned him, didn't feed him, didn't keep him clean, etc. Does his mother really deserve the way he treats her? Isn't that a bit unfair to punish someone for something someone else did?

An appropriate story that fits in well here is to talk about how common it is for a man to get upset at work because his boss berated him. He can't tell his boss he is upset so he comes in the door at home and kicks the dog or yells at the kids. Explain it is common to be angry at one person and lash out at a different person. "We are rarely angry at what we think we are."

What can he hold his birth mother (absent parent) responsible for? What does he hold his mother responsible for? Nonetheless, if he needs to continue punishing her for abuse his birth mother inflicted mother is strong enough and tough enough to handle it. Her love is stronger than his anger.

It follows to then ask, "What all have you done to push your mom's love away?" (He has already talked about this so it should come easier for him to recap it again.) Ask mom if her love has been pushed away by all he has done. Hopefully, enough work has been done with mom that she can't honestly say, "Nothing he has done has made me stop

loving him.” (If she can’t say that then more work needs to be done with mom to get her to a sense of compassionate, unconditional love toward her child.) Ask mom if she can think of something her child would do that would be the blow that makes her stop loving him. Typically, she will say there is nothing he could do. Ask her if she will continue loving him, acknowledging that there might be some things he does that would make it impossible for him to live at home, but that doesn’t mean mom would stop loving him.

Ask the child if he has any thoughts about what more he needs to do to prove to himself that his mother does not love him. What he has done to date hasn’t stopped her love so what more does he have to do to prove it to himself that he has a mom that loves him. What more does mom have to do to prove she loves him? Bake him more cakes? Take him more places? Typically the child will come to the conclusion that there is nothing more mom needs to do to prove she loves him.

It is at this moment that I sometimes, if I think the timing is right, bend over close to the child’s ear and whisper, “Besides, I think you secretly love your mom but are afraid to let her know. What do you think? Nod your head (or whisper back in my ear), if you secretly love your mom. Your secret is safe with me.”

If the time seems right, you can again whisper in the child’s ear and ask if he is ready to tell his mom the secret. Sometimes a child will share the secret with mom and sometimes he won’t. Not a problem either way.

Create a double bind for the child in which he is given permission to continue to do mean things to his mother, scream in his bedroom, poop in his pants, whatever. He needs to do whatever he needs to do in order to give his mother an opportunity to love him. Her love is stronger than his fear. He is not to stop being mean until he is ready to let her know he secretly loves her. Meanwhile if mom gets tired because his behavior is an energy drain she may need to take a break to protect the love she has for him. The “respite” may be overnight, for a week, longer.....it needs to last until mom is ready to jump back in and be the awesome mom her child needs. The message to the child is not around his behavior, but around mom’s exhaustion. If he wants to be at home or out of his room more then he needs to behave in such a way that she does not become exhausted. This opens the therapeutic conversation to, “There is no doubt that your mom loves you! However, are you easy to love or hard to love? The easier you are to love and be around, the more you get to be around her. The harder you are to love and be around, the more she needs to take a break and get her energy back. Your choice.”

All of the above conversations can be reworked using “trust” instead of “love” as the issue.

Lie 4 – “Life is supposed to be fair.”

Children who live on the edge of fear are vigilant about being treated “fairly”, ever watchful that someone else is getting more than they are. Common screams coming out of the child’s mouth are, “That’s not fair!” “It’s not fair!”, “He got more than me!”, “It’s my turn!”

Confronting this view is very straightforward. Admit to the child that he is indeed right. It is not fair. “Life is not fair. However.....do you really want life to be fair? Right now life is not fair. But it is not fair in your favor. You had a rough start in life. (Or the traumatic experience is referenced.) In order to make it fair everyone would have to have a rough start. Some kids are going to be in car accidents today. In order for life to be fair, you need to be in a car accident. Some kids are not going to have anything to eat today. In order for life to be fair you would also need to go hungry. The problem is that life is not

fair. And it is not fair in your favor! You have far more benefits and comforts in life than most children. In order for life to be fair you would have to contribute some of what you have so other children can have things as well. How fair do you want life to be? Because right now, it is not fair, but it is not fair in your favor.”

When children go home and then continue the “that is not fair” rant then the parents can do something to drive home the fairness principle. If they go out to a restaurant then what his sibling orders is what he gets, in order to be fair. If his sibling gets a new pair of shoes then he gets the same pair, whether or not he likes them in order for it to be fair. Ad nauseum. This is a child’s lament that can be easily and humorously dealt with at home.

Lie 5 – “I am worth being abused”

A most common behavior among traumatized children is their need to take a good situation and ruin it for themselves and others. It confirms their sense of their own self worth to set up situations where they can act out their fear and pain, giving others the chance to reject them. Instead of saying, “I really acted badly,” the child can say, “See, they never loved me anyways”, “See, they cannot be trusted to take care of me.”

The conversation can begin with asking questions about how they were abused and neglected in early years, whatever the trauma was. Ask them to retell their story. This is helpful for two reasons. One, by retelling the story in a matter of fact way it defuses the emotional impact. It uses the process of taking “emotional memories” (Emotional memories have the power to recreate the original emotions and behaviors so the child is reliving the event.) and turning them into “memories of an emotion” (The child remembers what happened and what they felt but do not feel the emotions at the time).

Two, it gives their current behaviors legitimacy. By always having a clear picture in mind of exactly what happened to the child, the therapist and parents can help this retelling along as much as they wish.

After retelling the child’s history of abuse, neglect, or trauma the therapist continues. “Wow, you sure got used to being hurt (or scared, abused, neglected). Your brain wired around being afraid and in pain. I can see that those feelings need to be visited again and again. You might not feel as if you were you if you weren’t feeling angry and scared. What are your parents now doing to abuse and neglect you? Nothing? But, you are used to feeling scared (neglected, abused)! Being loved and safe must be out of your comfort zone. Are you sure you are not being abused and neglected in your home? Well, actually, you are being abused and neglected in your home. Who is abusing and neglecting you now? Who is hurting you? Who is making sure you don’t have good times? Who is destroying your nice things? Right. You are. You are abusing yourself. Since your birth parents are not around to abuse you and you believe you are only worth being abused, you have had to step up and be the abuser.”

This is a good opportunity to use a “two voice” technique. Leaning into the child’s right ear you nastily whisper, “You are not worth having nice things, doing fun things, being successful at school, being clean (for children who continually soil themselves). Don’t let your mom deceive you with her loving words and gifts and nice meals and nice clothes. You are not worth squat. Keep up the destruction. She will leave you just like I did. Push her away before she pushes you away. It will hurt less if you are in control.” Etc.

Mom comes and whispers lovingly in the left ear, “I love you. You are worth nice things. You are worth fun times. You can be clean. You are smart. Your birth mom (If you know the bio mom’s name it is useful here.) wasn’t able to teach you how precious you are. She lied to you. She taught you anger is more powerful than love. She is still lying to

you. She pushed you away and now you are pushing me away. My love is stronger than your fear.” Etc.

Once each voice has been established for the child, both therapist and mother whisper in the ears at the same time. After about 30 seconds, both quit and the child is given the opportunity to choose the voice it wants to listen to. Invariably they choose mom. Mom can pop a piece of candy in the child’s mouth and hold the child close in her lap.

While the mom is holding the child she can be coached in calling out the child’s birth mom when the child misbehaves at home. “I love you. You must be listening to ____ (your bio mom). She is the one who taught you that you are not worth loving. Well, take her to your room and when you are done listening to her I will check and see if you are ready to come out and be around the mother who loves you.”

Substituting the trauma issue instead of the “birth mother issue, is up to the therapist.

Lie 6 – “That doesn’t hurt.”

Some children who have been abused or traumatized have the ability to shut down their nerve endings. CBTWTBBT’TWT’T It was a skill they developed as a coping mechanism to lessen the physical pain of their abuse/trauma. Pains from hunger, pain from diaper rash, come into play as well. They grit their psyche and say, “That doesn’t hurt”. They say it over and over again until it becomes true. That is one of the reasons why corporal punishment, spanking or any sort of physical discipline has no impact. The children literally have the capability to “Grin and bear it.” This further infuriates the parents as they believe the child is mocking them so their ego gets in the way of more appropriate parenting responses. The child is not mocking the parents so much as internally voicing how silly it is for a parent to think they can hurt a child more than they have already been hurt by a mere swat on the rear. Parents can get into real emotional trouble when they try to escalate consequences in the expectation that the child will back off. The child disturbed by abuse, neglect or trauma welcomes parental escalation as it makes their resolve to not be affected by parental interventions greater. In the face of escalating parental discipline the child actually becomes stronger in his determination to not allow parenting interventions to affect him. These insights for the parents and child help normalize a behavior that confuses the child and annoys the parents. The goal is for everyone to have compassion for the unfortunate situation.

In therapy we go over the abuse or trauma that caused the child to shut down their nerve endings, acknowledging the ability is quite unusual and might lead to some positive job opportunities as an adult. There are numerous jobs where the ability to not feel the cold, for example, would be an asset. Future intimate relationships, however, might not flourish if the nerve endings for touch and hugs, for example, are shut down.

Coaching parents in Theraplay techniques that reawaken the child’s nerve endings in a low key, non threatening way, works well. Feathers on the skin, drawing letters on the child’s back, etc, defuse the child’s determination to not feel touch.

The concept of “That doesn’t hurt” applies to situations outside of physical touch. Parents often have the false sense that if a child appears to enjoy a parenting intervention that it didn’t have an affect on the child. Examples:

The parents sends the child to his room for being out of control in some way (mouth, body, etc). The child expresses that he is glad to go to his room as then he won’t have be around mean people, or something like that. The parents get upset as they believe sending the child to his room is the wrong thing to do if the child says he enjoys it. Parents

might need to be reminded that a great many parenting interventions are not necessarily designed to have a negative impact on the child. Rather they may be to have a positive impact on the parents and siblings. When parents get overwhelmed by a child's negative behaviors that are causing stress throughout the family and house it is a form of protection from abuse that requires the child to go to his room. It is not to transform the child's thinking in any way, it is to give the family a breather. Having entertaining manipulatives in the child's room, puzzles, books, blocks, etc help the child divert his thinking while he and/or the family calms down.

“Watch Me” Behaviors

Children who have survived pervasive abuse, neglect and/or trauma often are very bright. Their “EQ”, emotional intelligence, might be low but their IQ can be very high. Their high intelligence and ability to manipulate a situation is well honed as it was key to their survival. They are living in a loving home yet they don't trust that they are safe. So they continually press against the boundaries, refusing to learn from Cause and Effect thinking. Refusing to change their behavior due to consequences. The parents despair because no matter what they do, what parenting advice they follow, the child continues to repeat the behavior.

The therapeutic insight in these very common situations is the children do not change or modify their behavior due to discipline or consequences as they prefer the secondary gain of maintaining the negative behaviors. The secondary gain, in these instances is often guaranteeing they will be watched. Feeling safe, therefore, is the positive striving. CBTWTBTTTWT

The assumption for therapists and parents is that the child would choose to cooperate in order to gain more freedom, fewer restrictions, less close supervision by an attentive parent. However, for children who, at a critical period of brain development were hurt because they were not, or believe they were not, under the watchful eye of a loving and attentive parent, and were therefore subjected to horrific situations being watched increases their safety. They WANT to be watched! If they are not being watched something awful could happen to them. The last thing the child wants is for the parent to stop keeping a watchful eye on them. Rather than change those dangerous, destructive behaviors that make the parents hypervigilant they escalate them as they believe the watchful eyes of their parents are keeping them safe.

This is a valuable reframe for parents, who can then see the behaviors as positive strivings for safety and connection to the parents rather than distancing behaviors. The parents and therapists can brainstorm ways for the child to be in “line of vision supervision” by the parents without needing to be destructive to attract the attention the child needs and wants.

In therapy the conversation can begin with the child listing the various behaviors he engages in to make sure his parents are vigilant. Common answers would be teasing siblings, breaking toys, screaming, hurting the pet, etc. For many children their numerous negative behaviors make them the focus of their parent's every minute. Yet, acknowledging to the child, how quickly they learned to read or ride a bike gives the therapist a chance to praise the child for being unusually bright and quick to learn. So, the questioning continues, why is the child not learning to stop engaging in those behaviors that require the parents to watch them continually in order to catch infractions? The child will not know the answer, to which

the therapist can lightly proclaim, “Well, then this is your lucky day. As I do happen to know the answer. 10 jumping jacks and you can borrow my brain and ask me, “Why do I do the same thing over and over again, knowing my parents are watching me and are ready to consequence me?”

For adoptees. If the child is small enough it is helpful to have the child in mom’s lap while the therapist questions and explains all of the missing connections. Older children can sit next to their parents. “Did your birth mom hold you close and make you feel as if you were the center of her universe? Did your mom smile at you and let you know that you were the apple of her eye? Did your mom gaze into your eyes while she lovingly fed you? Did your mom watch you as you learned to walk? Etc” To all of these questions the child will answer “no” or not respond at all. This is fine. The point is to explain to the child that at a critical stage of his early childhood his bio mom did not watch the baby. Did not know when the baby was dirty or hungry or lonely. The bio mom did not watch while the baby/child was hurt/abused by various people.

Tie in the child’s specific history of being hurt because he was not being watched and was not kept safe. Extend that point to share with the child that it why he creates situations in which he has to be watched. He does not know how to tell his mother how scared he is with words so he acts out his fear in ways that force mom to pay attention to him. Theraplay games are useful to give mom an opportunity to play a game with the child in which he practices telling her things. The game where the child envisions an object and mom must find it by moving around the room while the child watches her! He can then tell her “hot” or “cold” depending on her proximity. The goal is for the child to lead mom to the object. The roles are reversed and mom must lead the child to the object with verbal “hot”, “warm”, “cold” cues.

Normalizing these behaviors allows the conversation to turn to other ways he can let his mother know he is lonely and scared. However, in the meantime, until he figures out other, less destructive ways, to get his “watch me” needs met he is to continue doing everything he can to create situations where his mother must watch him. Parents cannot stop a behavior they cannot control. However, they can create situations where the “watch me” behaviors are on their schedule, rather than the child’s.

Children with “watch me” behaviors should not have the run of the house as it is unsafe for the child, the home and the family. Creating a boundary in the home where the child can be close and safe is useful. The “boundary” can be a beach towel, a smallish rug, a baby blanket. Anything that defines a safe space for the child so he can be in the room with his mother, playing/reading on his blanket, while she is close and able to see him at all times. The boundary is a way for him to be around mom and the family. If the child is not able to stay on the boundary then he needs to be sent to his room. He can either be watched safely near mom or he needs to be safely in his room. Having the child go to his boundary when he gets home from school or enters the home after an activity is good training for him to keep himself and the home safe. As his “watch me” behaviors diminish he can gradually be given more freedom, such as staying in the room with mom without having to be on his boundary.

Creating Parents Who Say Yes/Creating Parents Who Say No

Children are co creators of their parents. Parents readily respond to the infant’s needs and the children tend to become responsive to the parents. Children who are easy to get along with, cooperative, easily soothed and satisfied create parents who are relaxed and have no trouble saying “yes” to the child’s requests. The child, due to early childhood

experiences where the bonding cycle turned around well, enjoys pleasing their parents and their parents enjoy pleasing their children.

Not so the children who have been abused, neglected and/or traumatized. The bonding cycle did not turn around well for them. They did not have responsive parents who took solicitous care of them so in order to survive they became self parenting. There is a tendency for children who do not trust adults due to early childhood abuse and neglect to avoid cooperating with parents as they do not trust their parents to do what is good for them. No matter what the parent asks, it is met with defiance and uncooperation as the child's survival is at stake....at least as far as the child's belief system is concerned. The positive striving is maintaining distance and control to enhance a feeling of self reliance. CBTWTBTTTWTT.

As before, the first goal of the therapist is to normalize the child's behavior so both the parents and the child see them as the natural result of early childhood experiences. That is not to say the behaviors are advantageous to the child in the long run, just that they are "normal" to the child.

Begin with the child listing the things the child wants and the parent has said no. Lists of activities the child wants to do, toys the child wants to have, etc. Does he like that the parent frequently says "no" to his requests? What is up with that? Don't his parents love him? Don't his parents want the best for him?

Go over the list and talk about why the parent typically says, "No". The reasons are numerous. In the past the child has destroyed what the parents have bought for him. The child still has not made recompense for the toys he has destroyed, often toys that have belonged to others. What he is asking for is not safe for him to have. It is too expensive. If it is a food item, it is not healthy for the child. Etc. Ask the parents why they have not bought "X" for the child. Have the child repeat the reason. Ask, "Do you understand why your parents said, 'No'?" Go over it again if need be. If the child shrugs his shoulders and says he doesn't know the therapeutic fall back is, "Great, this is your lucky day. As I just happen to know. 10 jumping jacks and you can borrow my brain and your mom and I will tell you again. No problem."

If the child gets stuck on this, it is not a problem. Skip to, "I know you know and can see why you would not want to say it out loud. No problem. Besides, the point isn't why your parents say no to you so much of the time. The problem for you is how to get them to say yes. Right?

Lets review. What have you asked for and your parents said, "No"? Have you asked for that before, or something like it, and your parents said "no" then as well? So whose fault is it that your parents say no to you? Is it their fault for being mean and not wanting what is good for you? Or, is it your fault that you set them up to say "No" to you. Knowing they will say no to your request you ask for it anyway. You sabotage your own well being by asking for things you know your mom will not agree to. There is a real possibility that you don't want your mom to say 'yes' to you as that might mean she loves you and she is worth loving back. You know what you have to ask for in order to get a positive response, but don't do it. Have you ever wondered why that is? Maybe you want to keep putting her in the role of the abusive and neglectful parent so you create situations where you can feel abused and neglected. Might be a comfort zone for you! Whatever the reason, how many times are you going to set your parents up to say, 'No' to you?"

This is a good opportunity to go over the Rage/Trust cycle (Renaming it Trauma Cycle when that is the issue) and point out how when the child cried because he was hungry, lonely, etc. The birth mom did not come, in essence saying "No" to the child over and over

again. Now the birth mom is out of the picture and the child is setting up the adoptive mom to take the place of the bio mom in saying “No” all of the time. A form of “abusing himself in the absence of the abuser.”

“What are the sorts of things you could ask for where your mother would say “Yes”? Does your mom say “Yes” more often to some of the other kids in the family? What are the sorts of things they ask for? Have you ever considered observing them to see how they get your mother to say “yes” to them?

“What privileges will your parent say ,”No” to? Which privileges will your parent say “Yes” to with provisions? What will those provisions be? See! You know what will get you privileges and what requests will be denied. Interesting that you set yourself up for that?”

Another therapeutic exercise is to have the child ask Mom for something he knows she will say “No” to. Have him ask her over and over. Each time he asks, Mom says, “No”. How many times do you need to ask for the same thing knowing your mom will say, “No”? Ten times? Hundred times? Have the child state a number and then count out asking mom that many times, with the same answer being, “No”. How many more times do you need to ask your mom the same thing? At what point do you think she will change her mind and say, “Yes”? Never? Then what is the point except to set yourself up for failure?

Hearing “No”, Being told “No”

One of the behaviors that is so exasperating for parents to deal with is having the same request made over and over again. The child gets the same answer, “No, that is not possible right now”. “No, you may not have that”. “No, we are not doing that”. The parent exhausts herself saying “No”. A therapeutic conversation might begin with talking to the child about having a pet. How quickly does a puppy learn where its food dish is? After being shown one time? After being shown 3 times? Does the puppy learn quickly or slowly where the food and water dishes are? Right, the puppy learns quite quickly. So, are you smarter or not as smart as the family dog? Can you learn things more quickly or more slowly? Right. You are a faster learner than a puppy! That is why it is hard for me and your parents to understand why it is taking you so long to learn the meaning of the word, “No”. How many times do you have to hear the word “No” before you understand your parents mean it? How much longer do you need to hear the word “No” before you accept it? Your parents are fine with continuing to say “no” when it is necessary. The question isn’t how long will they keep saying “no”. The question is, how long do you need to keep hearing it?

Saving Sibling from Raging

Numerous families have, not just one emotionally and behaviorally disturbed child, but 2 or more! There is a special place in heaven for them! When working with the family it is often advantageous to work with the healthiest child first. Families with two or more traumatized children with disordered attachments need to be separated as much as possible. Each child needs to be in their own room or on their own boundary at all times, unless they are in a one on one situation with a parent. It is not unusual for one child to take the lead in “crazy making behavior” while the other one sits back and watches. Traumatized children find their comfort zone in high stress situations as it mimics the high stress levels of their infancy. This might be their postivie striving. If the family is calm the child is out of his comfort zone so must find a way to disrupt the equanimity by finding a way to negatively arouse someone, himself, his parents, the dog! When one child escalates the other disturbed

child will often sit back and just bask in the high stress situation, knowing it is all under control of the other child and they do not need to do anything but relax in the ensuing chaos that has been created.

Enuresis/Encopresis

Defecating and wetting one's pants is another example of a behavior that, at a point in everyone's infantile and toddler lives, soiling oneself was normal, expected and, for the most part, cleaned up by caregivers without resentment. At some age, however, the behavior becomes problematic for both the child and the adults and is often indicative of deep feelings and fear. The goal of the conversation with both parents and child is to reframe the behavior away from a control battle, which parents tend to lose (as clearly one thing parents have absolutely no control over is where and when children excrete,) and to introduce the idea the behavior actually can be seen as a positive striving on the part of the child. The positive message of the child could be any one of several or a combination of them.

1 – need to take control in the only way he can, and, by keeping control keeping himself safe

2 – to demonstrate nonverbally how “pissed” he is, how “shitty” he feels

3 – need to avoid being sexually molested as in previous homes being soiled might have been reason enough for a perpetrator to desist

Whatever the underlying reason, the secondary effect is the child is unhappy. The loss of esteem to himself and among his peers is heartbreaking, however, if that is the only form of communication available then he must go with it. Adults must keep in mind it is the child's ego and unhappiness that is the major concern, not the parent's inconvenience and frustration.

This is where an understanding of trauma and specifically the child's personal history is critically important.

Conversation #1

Since the child is behaving non verbally with his parents it is unlikely he is going to walk into the therapist's office and declare, “Well, you see, I was sexually molested so right now I am not feeling as if adults can keep me safe and it makes me very scared and angry.” It is sometimes useful for the parents and therapist to have a third party conversation about what could be the reason for the pooping and/or peeing, giving the child permission to not talk as what happened to them is too awful for words. We know that when adults talk, children listen. The adults then conjecture about what happened. The therapist and parents can make non judgmental, flat affect, statements regarding numerous calculated possibilities of what could have happened to the child when the child was too young to express in words what was happening to them. Perhaps, the adults can conjecture, the child does not even remember trauma events as he/she was too young. Part of the conversation will be admitting that sometimes things happen to children before they have conscious memories of them (Emotional and/or body memories), particularly when children were in orphanages, foster care, day care when they could have been abused without the ability to consciously recollect it. Older children have been subjected to abuse by adults in a position of trust and cannot relate their experiences or have tried to tell someone only to have their stories dismissed. Having parents go over with the therapist those times when their child was out of their care and, as wild as the thought seems, something may have happened. Watching

the child for “tells”, in either their body or face, is more discernible if the child is sitting on a parent’s lap, facing the therapist while the adults talk. Whatever the child does, the conversation is concluded with a statement to the effect, “Clearly, we do not know what happened to you that you soil your pants. What we do know is whether or not you remember it, something did happen and your body is telling us that it is still upsetting you and making you unhappy. We also know, that if someone did hurt you it is not your fault and there is nothing to feel guilt or shame about. We want you to know it is important that you continue to soil your pants until we figure it out as that is the only way we know you are still unhappy and we want nothing more for you then for you to be happy. Promise me you will keep letting us know we have not helped you to become happy and safe by continuing to soil your pants. OK? Whatever you discover about why you are wetting the bed and/or soiling yourself know that you are loved exactly as you are. You can decide at any time to set your fear and unhappiness aside and use the toilet or you can continue to soil yourself. OK? However, in the meantime, do you think it is fair for your parents to have to clean you up and clean up after you? After all, they put their pee and poop in the toilet and cleanly flush it away. If you, from some inner determination that you can’t use the toilet, decide to soil yourself and your bed, then it is only fair that you clean it up. OK? Before you go to school, or out to play, please strip your bed and get your wet bedding to the laundry room. Your mom will get it washed and dried and you can remake your bed before dinner.”

The work then must be trusted to the child to work through. Becoming heavy handed and angry with a child who soils himself/herself is counterproductive.

The point is not for the child to decide to share what happened, if he/she even remembers it. The goal is for the child to accept that there is a good possibility something did happen and whatever did happen is not the child’s fault, nor is it cause for the child to continue to suffer. However, if they do choose to continue to suffer then they must take responsibility for the results.

Conversation #2

Therapist to child and/or parents, whoever chooses to respond is fine:
“Do you know what people say when they are mad or upset? ‘I’m so pissed!’ or ‘That was shitty’. That means that in their very gut, their very core inside of themselves, they feel dirty by what happened. Whether it is failing a math test or being bullied. They are so angry and upset that they refer to all of the slimy crud inside of them and make it sound as if they are also dirty, slimy and cruddy about what happened. Sometimes people will say, “I am pissed at myself for doing that. I knew better.” More often, however, they are talking about something that happened to them that made them feel terrible about themselves. Talking about being pissed or feeling shitty, however, is just that. Talk. They are not actually going to pee on themselves or soil their pants. They are letting their upset and frustration out in words. When things happen to children who cannot express themselves verbally, however, it is not just “talk”. It is action. Because the trauma occurred before they were able to express themselves verbally they act out feeling “shitty” and “pissy”. We understand you feel ‘shitty’ and or ‘pissy’. We accept that you need to soil yourself as part of your need to let us know you how you are feeling but cannot put it into words.”

Further Conversations

Therapist to child:

All people poop and pee. Poop and pee is what is left over when the body has taken all of the nutrients out of it. Their body uses what is useful to help them grow and be strong and healthy and then sends what is left over down the intestines. When the body gives the intestines a message that it is full then a message goes to the brain and tells the person it is time to go to the toilet and get rid of it. Then the person flushes it away because they no longer need it. However, children who have been abused and neglected, are angry or scared, do not find it so easy to just put it in a toilet and watch it be washed away, out of the house. For a variety of reasons they hang on to it.

1 – We have sayings in English that tell us how people connect poop and pee and feeling angry and upset. Things that are described as “shit” are things that are unwelcome, worthless and not worth keeping.

“I feel shitty”.

“She’s just a piece of shit.”

“Shit happens.”

“The shit is going to hit the fan.”

“He’s full of shit.”

“She hangs on to her shit.”

“He needs to clean up his shit.”

“You stupid shit.”

“I’m pissed.”

“Piss off.”

Children who feel like shit, worthless, and unlovable act that out by soiling themselves, reminding themselves and everyone around them how worthless and unlovable they are. Then, just to make sure everyone gets the message, they make themselves unlovable by soiling themselves. By creating a cloud of stench around themselves they are making sure people do not get close, avoiding attachment, thereby confirming how worthless they are.

Another message is, “I am hanging on to my shit (anger, fear, resentment). No amount of love or therapy or anything is going to make me let it go.”

2 - Consider children who hold onto their “shit” and “piss”, literally, until they can put it where it conveys a message. Children who do not deposit their bodily wastes in the toilet are using them as a communications tool. They are creating a nonverbal message that they are angry and scared. The message behind refusing to place body wastes in the toilet and letting them be carried out of the house is clear. “Until my shit is cleared up we are all going to have to live with it. I am not going to take all of my anger, fear and hurt and send them out of the house without everyone suffering along with me. If I am feeling shitty, I am going to make sure everyone else is feeling shitty as well.”

Conversation 3

Sometimes this is a third party conversation where the child is present but the adults are talking, surmising out loud, what might have happened to a child they he or she would deliberately soil themselves. (And make no mistake...it is deliberate and meaningful. Discerning the meaning is the task of adults.) The adults could wonder if, perhaps, at some point in the child’s life he/she was so not safe that they were in danger of being molested. One way to make sure a he/she is unattractive to a perpetrator is to soil themselves. Soiling oneself, particularly at night, is one way to make sure the perpetrator leaves them alone.

Because so much of a child's history is missing many of the conversations between the adults is just out loud conjecturing, in hopes something strikes a responsive chord in the child. Whether or not the child responds, all conversations about inappropriate bodily waste disposal must end with permission for the child to continue in the behavior as long as they need to so adults don't forget they are hurting. This is not only important for the child to hear but it clarifies for the parents there are some things they cannot control, so rather than look impotent, they give permission, and construct the issue as a positive striving for the child.

Sabotaging Good Times

It is difficult, if not impossible for people to understand why another person would choose to suffer. Yet, children who have been abused and/or neglected have suffering driven deep into their very marrows. All they know is suffering, grief, pain. They do not know or appreciate at a cellular level what it feels like to be joyful, truly, truly joyful, like a puppy quivering to be petted for the pleasure it imparts. Children who have never been abused or neglected have a joy about them that is insatiable. They reach out to the world with outstretched arms fully expecting their longing for loving touch and snuggles to be immediately reciprocated and gratified. Their brains are hardwired for love, touch, eye contact, and everything else that creates an indissoluble bond. As a result they seek out experiences and interactions that reinforce those deep pleasure circuits. Children whose experiences have hard wired their brain to expect pain and fear are not so inclined. CBTWTBBTTTWTT. They expect, and therefore seek out as reinforcing their hard wiring, to be hurt, humiliated, scared, rejected, starved, dirty.....so seek out experiences that reinforce their negative expectations. The positive striving is to create a comfort zone for themselves and create situations where their hopelessness is confirmed.

Children with low feelings of self worth often find ways to affirm that by making sure their outer experiences match their inner voice. When children have suffered and have decided they are doomed to suffer, becoming helpless and hopeless, it creates a cognitive dissonance for them when they are treated nicely, exposed to fun times, and given new toys and clothes. Many abused and neglected children cannot create an inner voice that is kinder to them so they work to bring the outer world into compliance with their inner world. It is common for parents to remark that their child seems to deliberately rob themselves of good times. They ruin their own birthday party. They cut up their new clothes. They break their new toys. They make sure family holidays and events are disrupted. Part of it may be a need to control adults by refuting their wishes. However, the non verbal positive striving, is to communicate to adults their world is not a happy place. The world they live in is bleak and destructive, filled with self loathing. The conversation with the child would include an acknowledgement that they do not feel worthy of nice things and good times and everyone is glad that is being communicated. However, the larger task is find ways to circumvent the need of the child to sabotage personal property and fun events. Birthday parties can usually be held early, before the child's birthday, so the child does not have time to become anxious. Christmas presents can also be opened early. Contracting with the child about events is another opportunity to give the child a way to become planful about his or her behavior rather than just reactive. Taking valuable items out of the child's room and placing them out of harm's way saves the child from feeling guilty and regretful of a choice he made.

Sometimes children are not mature enough and emotionally stable enough to benefit from natural and logical consequences.

“I would love to get you some new school clothes, but in the past, you have not felt you were worth looking nice so you destroyed them. Do you want to get clothes at the thrift store so it won’t matter to anyone if you cut them up? Do you want me to get you one new item to see what you do with it? What do you think?”

Engaging the child in the conversation is a way for the child to choose a reaction. Oftentimes when a child chooses a positive reaction they make a contract with themselves they will keep. Since the voice inside of them is more powerful than the adult voices in their life they tend to listen to themselves rather than someone else. So if they tell themselves they will not destroy a toy they are more apt to not destroy the toy. If an adult tells them not to break the toy, they will react by doing the opposite of what they are told. They will have to break the toy just to show the adult they are not in charge of them.

Contracting with a child prior to fun times is also important. Tell the child what the plan is. Going to a friend’s house for a BBQ. Playing with other children at a park. Whatever the event is, let them know the behavior expectations and ask the child if he/she thinks she is up to those. If yes, the child is contracting with himself/herself, not with the parents. If not, then other arrangements need to be made for the child during that time. A babysitter can come in or the child can be dropped off at someone’s home for the duration. The goal is for the child to have a good time, wherever they choose to be, not to be punitive. The message is, “We had a good time, we hope you did too. Looks like we all made good choices.”

Birthdays

Cancelling Birthday

Looking at this chart, how old do you think you are behaving? How old do your parents think you are inside? Right. Now how many years has it been since you were born? Have you taken advantage of those years to grow in mind, body and soul? Or, have you wasted some of that time behaving younger than your birth age? Right. You are stuck being 3 behaviorally so there is no point in having a birthday party for a 10 year old who is not acting 10. Right?

Moving Birthday up

Many children who self sabotage fun times find it particularly necessary to ruin their own birthday party. The excitement and build up is too much. Or, they are secretly scared of growing up. They are afraid they won’t get the right present. Or, they get emotionally overwrought.... Whatever. It is sometimes helpful to have a surprise birthday party several days in advance so the child does not have time to build up anxiety around it. Moving Christmas up is also a way to catch a child off guard.

Having small family birthday party that is emotional age appropriate

A few days in advance of birthdate, instead of having a party for a chronological age of 10, have a small family gathering, with all of the pizzazz, presents and celebration for an emotional age level. Celebrate the child being a wonderful 3 year old. A larger friends party can be on the actual date.

Poor Hygiene

Children coming from abuse and/or neglect tend to have poor self images of themselves. They may give themselves different messages regarding hygiene. Each message can be examined with the child for validity. Helping the child get insight into why he/she has poor hygiene does not necessarily mean the child will start practicing cleanliness. It just helps the child and parents to understand what is going on in the child's brain so everyone can treat the situation compassionately and perhaps with a little humor.

One message which can be woven into a conversation with the child and parents is that when a parent is expected to lovingly and gently change a child's diaper and clean the child there was no loving and gentle parent. Diapers may not have been changed because the parent could not afford to change them often, leaving painful rashes that were inflamed further when they were wiped, leaving emotional scars of being washed. The diaper changer may have been angry and abusive about having to change a dirty diaper. Either way, being washed is associated with pain.

Small children in orphanages often do not wear diapers at all, leaving them to lie in their wastes. When they become "potty trained" children from poor circumstances may not have had access to toilet paper. Either way, children who are not wiped appropriately, become very used to the feel and smell of feces and urine. Being soiled does not bother them nearly as much as it bothers others, so it does double duty. It keeps people away who wish to become attached and it allows the child to enter its own comfort zone.

The same can be used of bathing, brushing teeth, washing hair and wearing deodorant. When small children are not washed their skin, hair and teeth develop a comfort zone around the film of oil and dirt. Washing it off makes them feel exposed and they can more fully feel the touch of air and the touch of others. Children accustomed to being dirty have remarked that after they bathe and get dressed they still feel "naked".

Another factor in some children who prefer to remain dirty is sexual abuse. Sexually molested children can easily lose sight of being clean on the outside as they feel so dirty on the inside, being outwardly clean doesn't matter.

Whatever the reason, be assured that whether or not the behavior is rational to the adults.....it is rational to the child. Figuring out what the rationale is might not change the behavior immediately. However, over time, as children heal they find ways to enter into societal norms in healthier ways.

Chores

Doing chores, helping around the house, is certainly a way for children to help their parents. More importantly, it is a way for children to develop the skills necessary for independence. When parents see chores as a training tool leading to maturation it is easier for them to understand that the importance of the task is not to force children to grow up. Rather assigning chores is giving the child an opportunity to grow up. If the child decides he/she does not want to grow up then they miss the opportunity to demonstrate maturity. It is always easier for the parent to do the chore himself/herself, then it is to fight, argue, raise voices, etc in the process of getting the child to do it. The parent can joyfully do the chore and then treat himself/herself to a reward. It is always better for the child to see mom doing things for the family with joy, rather than everyone suffering while the child does things with resentment. At the same time, privileges and activities the child would have if he/she were demonstrating maturity enough are calmly removed. It is not helpful to warn

the child they will be removed as that will start another round of arguments and raised voices. When the child asks for something they have not demonstrated the maturity to earn, that is time enough to calmly refuse to give it.

In talking with the child in advance of this philosophical change in parenting, parents and therapist need to be on the same page and talk lightly and easily about the change. Parents need to understand they must truly embrace this change in philosophy as children will very easily see through it if it is a charade. Children will push every button they can with their parents in order to see if they can get them to “break” and get angry over some undone chore. Parents need to be able to smile and treat themselves in such a way that it is worth it to them to pay themselves to do the chores while making sure the child has an equal drop in privileges and activities. The parent can say, “Whoever does first gets ice cream” or whatever the child, or themselves, would find appealing. The goal is for the child to get over his/her resistance to doing chores and understand there are rewards. Parents don’t need to be afraid of making it look like they are bribing their child to help out. Everyone works for “bribes”. Adults work for paychecks.

Common statements children make around chores, tasks, and adult requests have to do with rejection of parental authority. “You’re not my boss.” “You can’t make me.” “You can’t stop me.” This is when parents learn to smile with their eyes and calmly state affirmatives to the child. “You are right, ultimately I am not your boss. I can’t make you. You know what? I don’t even want to make you. The goal is for you to grow up and be your own boss. Listening to your own voice telling you what you need to do. The goal for you is to make yourself do what is right.”

“The problem is, someone has to tell everyone what to do. Someone tells all of us what to do. The law tells us how to drive our cars. If we don’t listen to the law and listen to ourselves telling us to listen to the law, then the police stop us and give us a ticket or a fine to remind us to listen to the law and do what it says. We can either grow up telling ourselves to do what is right or grow up waiting for others to tell us to do what is right. Who do you want telling you what to do? You or someone else? Right. You want to listen to yourself. Well, that is what we are practicing now. Giving you an opportunity to listen to yourself tell you the right thing to do. When you don’t, then someone else steps in. But most people grow up wanting to be in control and tell themselves what to do. Good luck figuring it out.”

Fair/Not Fair

One of the things children will say to parents that appears to strike a responsive chord is, “It’s not fair!” Followed by, “Why do I have to do it. Susie never does anything.” Or...It’s my turn. He always”. Whatever the precursor is the child’s lament is that something or another is not fair. My conversation begins, “Of course, it is not fair. Life is not fair.” The conversation continues with explaining that not only is life not fair, we really do not want it to be fair. If life were “fair”, when one person is in a car accident then in order for it to be fair, everyone else must also suffer in some way. When one person has to have a decayed tooth pulled then something must happen to everyone else so everyone’s experience of life is fair. The truth is, for almost everyone who comes to therapy, life is not fair, and it is fair to their advantage. They are not hungry when so many others are. How fair is that? They have a place to live when others do not. How fair is that. In order for life to be universally fair they would need to give up some of what they have in order to make sure life is fair to those who lack what they have. Getting children to see that not only is life not fair, but they really don’t want it to be, is important. For the most part, life is not fair to

their advantage. They are on the receiving end of life not being fair so they need to be careful of what they wish for.

One way for parents to drive the message home when a child throws the “It’s not fair” charge is to explain that in order for it to be fair then everyone needs to go to bed at the same time. Everyone needs to eat the same amount of food, regardless of how hungry or full they are. When one child takes dance lessons, they all get dance lessons. The concept of “fair” needs to change in everyone’s mind so it no longer is desirable.

Poor Listening/Poor Hearing

Parents are known to comment that their child never listens to what the parent is saying. “He doesn’t listen to me.” Sometimes, when exploring “Children behave the way they behave because they think the way they think” it turns out the child truly does tune out certain voices. Perhaps due to intensity or inflection or volume or message....the child has learned to block certain vocal sounds from entering their consciousness. For the most part there is nothing wrong with a child’s ears. This is readily explained to children. When a sound occurs there is no way for the brain under normal circumstances to not hear it. The disconnect comes in what they process and don’t process. Sometimes, for a variety of early childhood experiences, the child becomes “allergic” to Mom or Dad’s voices and does not process the sounds correctly. When parents raise their voices children learn to tune them out as they are so unpleasant. When what parents are saying is demeaning or harsh, children tune the voice out to protect their fragile ego from the onslaught. This causes the parent to shout even more, causing the child to become even more reactive and tuning it out. This causes a downward spiral. One solution to this is for parents to speak more quietly, forcing the child to tune in. Particularly if the parent is talking softly about cleaning up the house so everyone can go for ice cream. The goal is for children to want to listen to mom’s voice, not tune it out. In order for that to happen the parent must speak agreeably. Additionally something positive needs to happen when the child responds. Conversely, something the child would desire does not happen because they did not hear the instructions. All of it communicated in dulcet tones and words!

Another way to get children to listen is to devise a therapeutic game. Creating a miming game where the parent shouts and the child does the same, the parent speaks gruffly and the child mimics, the child chooses a tone or volume to speak and the parent mimics the child. Tuning into each other’s voices is a great learning exercise for both parent and child. Whining, nasal, crying, begging, etc. Having the child create the voice helps them to listen to themselves. Having the parent play it back to them helps them to hear how they sound to others.

The principle of 5 positives to every negative in order for a relationship to thrive holds true. Parents must make sure they are saying a minimum of 5 things a child wants to hear for every 1 thing said the child does not want to hear. If that balance is tipped and there are more negatives to positives then there is little incentive for children to want to hear what their parents say.

Another aspect of poor listening and hearing is the conflict inside a child’s head with another voice: the voice of the birth mother, or the voice of the abuser, or the voices of the caregivers in the orphanage or foster home. If early childhood experiences around voices, tones of voices, volume of voices, word choice of voices is disquieting to the child then every effort must be made to make sure the parental voices have no resemblance at all to the traumatizing voice.

CBTWTBBT’TWT’T.

Lack of Cause and Effect Thinking

The lack of cause and effect thinking is pervasive among traumatized children. Life does not make sense so why bother trying to make it so. CBTWTBBT'TTWTT.

“She Made Me So Mad”

Often when a parent or child loses their temper and says or does something they regret they use as their excuse, “When he did.....it made me so mad.” Or, “When he said He/she made me so mad”. There is so much to explore with these words with both parents and children.

The whole conceptualization of someone else making a parent or child do anything needs to be challenged.

When the parent makes the statement it is important to talk to the parent about what that means in front of the child, as children listen when adults talk. If the child believes the therapist is rebuking the parent the child will listen all the more! It is important to go over the role of the amygdala and the reptile portions of the brain with the parent, pointing out that emotions are automatic and fast. Emotions are aroused in a small area of the brain, much smaller than the area of the brain which controls problem solving. The area of the brain that releases emotion is also much closer to the brain stem so they are much faster than the cortex. Forcing the stimulus of the negative reaction to go through the prefrontal cortex where it can be processed more readily is important. As the parent does it he or she can talk out loud to the child about it. “What you did made me really mad. That is my first response, but acting out in anger right now is not going to be very useful, so I am going to take my anger through my brain and think of a response that will help us better deal with this situation.”

These conversations do not come easily to parents. Often times they must be practiced in front of a mirror or with another person in order to make sure the tone of voice is modulated. They can even be practiced with the child. “You know how I get so angry when you don’t put your things away? I am working on it. How would it sound if I said this instead? Is my tone of voice OK? Are my choice of words OK? Do you feel threatened in any way when I say this?” The child then sees that controlling the response to emotion is important and takes practice.

The parental response to the child can be coached. “If I could have made you do anything I would have made you happy. Why would I want to make someone I love angry? Do you think when you are angry life is easier for me? Who suffers when you are mad? You do and I do. Why would I want to do something that is going to come back and make life more difficult for me? What is my usual desire in the house? To go out of my way to make people miserable? Or, to find ways to calm the situation, work so people are happy? Do I deliberately make bad meals so you suffer? Do I make sure your clothes are dirty so you are embarrassed to wear them to school? Do I refuse to attend your basketball games? What? What do I do to make sure people in our family are unhappy? On the other hand, what do I do to help members of our family enjoy living together?”

Typically the child has no problem answering these questions of the parent. The last one is particularly important for the child to think about, whether in therapy or as therapeutic homework.

A good follow up to the parent’s statement of “He makes me so mad!” is to explore what the parent means by that. Does it mean they yelled? Does it mean they said mean

things? Does it mean they became violent? Ask the parent to describe what their behavior looks like when their child “makes them so mad.” After the parent has described it the child can be asked if the parents depiction is accurate. The child can also be asked how often their parents get angry and say or do something inappropriate. Family therapy is exactly that. A time when every member of the family gets to assess the behaviors of other members honestly. If the parents are not expected to honestly describe their behavior, with critique by the child, then no one can expect the child to take responsibility for his or her behavior. This is also an opportunity for parents to apologize to the child for not handling his or her anger appropriately. Again, this models for the child how apologies are done and gives the child a way to practice apologizing for behavior. “Wow, Mom, that was hard to apologize. Johnny, did Mom sound as if she meant it? Do you hear the love your mom has for you even though she has lost her temper? Do you think this means your Mom will never lose her temper again? Does it mean she is working to become aware of how often she gets angry and what it looks like? When you lose your temper does it mean that you no longer love your mom? When you apologize does it mean you will never do it again? Does it mean you will work on it?”

Another important conversation around “He makes me so mad” is to explore exactly how someone makes someone else feel a certain way. “How does your mom ‘make’ you angry?” The child can explain when mom tells him it is time to go to bed he gets angry. Or, whenever he is told to do a chore, he gets angry as its not fair and he was doing something else and didn’t want to be interrupted. Whatever the child’s response is the therapist feeds that back to the child. “So, when your mom says, ‘Turn off the TV’, you get mad.” Turning to mom the therapist asks her to tell her child to turn off the TV. Mom tells the child to turn off the TV and the therapist asks the child if he was getting angry yet. He is not, so the mom’s tone of voice is explored. “Does your mom yell at you when she tells you to turn off the TV?” “Mom, yell at him and tell him to turn off the TV.” Mom does so and the child does not get aroused. The therapist asks the child, “So, you didn’t get angry. What was that about? I thought when your mom told you that you became angry.” What is different? Right, all sorts of things are different. I am in the room and it would look silly for you to get angry right now. You are not actually watching TV so nothing is being interrupted. Other things are different. So, it is not the words your mom is saying that ‘make you angry’. Your mom can say the same thing and you don’t get angry so it must be something else. What could that be? Could it be that in here you are not surprised because you are not concentrating on what you are doing? Could it be you are not getting into a control battle about it? Mom is not actually bossing you around as she does at home? What is it?” The child might have some ideas about that, all of which are endorsed. It comes back to the central issue. Your turning off the TV when you are told to. Do you think it is within the role of a parent to direct their child to do things at certain times? Sure it is. Everyone is told to do things by other people throughout their lives. Stop signs tell people to stop. Teachers tell students to do their homework. Bosses tell their employees what to do. No one goes through life without having to follow directions. Mom is going to have to tell you to do things. We can, however, discuss what is the best way for her to do that for you. Some kids are allergic to their mom’s voices so just having mom open her mouth and talk arouses anger. Are you that kind of kid? Is so, how else do you want mom to tell you what to do? Do you want her to write you a note? Do you want her to give you a warning sign that she is going to give you a directive in 5 minutes so you have time to prepare? Lets negotiate the best way for you to be told what to do so you are able to do it without getting angry.”

At some point it is also useful to talk to the child about “My mom makes me so mad”. Asking, “Isn’t it a bit odd to think that your mom goes out of her way to make you mad? Don’t you think if your mom had the ability to dictate what you were feeling she would make you happy? What kind of mom spends her time trying to find ways to make her child angry? Right, not your mom. Have you ever seen puppets? (Having marionettes is useful to illustrate.) There are sock puppets and animal puppets and a very unique puppet that is operated by strings in the puppeteer’s hands. Whatever kind of puppet you are familiar with, the puppet is manipulated by someone else’s hands pulling on strings to make them dance or wiggling their fingers inside the puppet to make the puppet look like it is talking. The puppeteer is in charge of what the puppet does. The puppet is lifeless and has no mind of its own. It cannot do anything until the puppeteer takes over. The puppeteer must make the puppet dance or talk or wave its arms or anything. When you say your mom makes you angry it sounds as if you are some sort of puppet, not able to think or do anything until your mom makes you do it. Does that make sense? Of course not. Is your mom able to make you do anything? If she told you to pick up this pencil and you didn’t want to do it, how would she make you do it? She can’t. She is dependent on your good will and choice to pick up the pencil, or turn off the TV, or set the table. Where does that good will come from? Sometimes do you have more good will to do things than other times? Right, so it really has nothing to do with your mom or what she says or how she says it. It depends entirely on what is happening in your brain when she asks you. Inside your brain, where she cannot see so does not know if when she asks you to do something you will have good will or get angry. Either way, it is not what your mom is doing or saying. It is what your brain is doing and saying about your mom. CBTWTTBBT*TWTT. What in your experiences, your past, made you decide you could not trust your mom to take care of you even when she is giving you a directive?

Whatever the reason from the past that the child uses to rationalize why it is important to get angry at certain times, at some point the conversation has to turn to taking responsibility for one’s behavior. Confirm that feelings are automatic and fast acting and come from a part of the brain that does not problem solve well. Nonetheless, it must be clarified over and over again, feelings are automatic but what a person does with their feelings to guide their thoughts and actions is a matter of choice.

Taking Responsibility

Taking responsibility is a way to grow and learn and not make the same mistake. To not take responsibility is to put your life into the hands of others as if you were a small boat on a big ocean, tossed about by every wave that comes along, powerless to take control. Not taking responsibility is saying your life is out of your control and you are powerless to affect events. Taking responsibility is saying, “I know what happened. I know what part I played. I know how to make sure it does not happen again. I know what I have to do differently if I don’t want the same thing to happen.”

Oftentimes a child, when describing an event which they participated in and which turned out badly, will tell the story in such a way to remove all blame from themselves. Asking questions about the specifics of the event will help make it clear what part the child played.

Begin by asking the child if they have ever been in a huge windstorm or a hurricane. Describe the effects of having a beach house and the wind and waves pick up. The owner cannot control the forces of nature. It is not his fault that they become so powerful the beach house is destroyed. What to do? Does the owner build the house exactly in the same

spot, in exactly the same way? Or does the owner think, “I want to have a house on this beach, what do I need to do differently in order for the house to survive another huge storm? The owner could think of a number of things. People who live on beaches find ways to rebuild so the home won’t be washed away in the next huge storm. The house can be built up on stilts so the waves go under the house instead of over it. The house can be built with stronger foundation, construction and roof. The house can be built with storm shutters over the windows so the glass does not break. The owner is not helpless and can find ways to change the way the house is built so it will outlast mother nature.

“How are you like the home owner on the beach? Maybe the owner put the beach house in a poor location. Maybe he did not build it strong enough. What he does know is that he cannot control forces outside of himself. All he can do is change the way he deals with those forces so they do not damage his property. What could you have changed about the way this last situation developed and concluded? Is there anything you can do to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen again? Whether or not it is your fault, what could you have done differently? What can you do differently to make sure you are not in that position again? What can you do to take control of your future so this does not happen again?”

Taking responsibility creates the freedom and power to make things different in the future.

Automatic Pilot

What is an automatic pilot? What is it in a plane? How is a plane programmed to fly without a pilot actually guiding it? How is it useful? When is it not useful? How is the pilot trained to switch the plane to automatic pilot and how to switch it back to pilot control? How are brains trained to be on automatic pilot? Reading? Does every line on every page need to be analyzed and interpreted or does the brain just go on automatic pilot? What other situations during the day is the brain on automatic pilot? Eating? Sleeping? Running?

What if the brain had been trained to like sweets. Would eating candy be on automatic pilot? See it. Eat it. What if you thought you were gaining too much weight and you wanted to take it off automatic pilot. Would that be easy or hard? Would you slip up occasionally?

What if early childhood experiences made fear or anger automatic? Would it be easy or hard to change the automatic responses and the person take back control? What if being asked to do a chore put your brain in automatic pilot and you say “no” without thinking about it, without thinking about whether or not doing the chore would be good or not?

Parents and child can both take part in the exercise of taking the brain off “automatic pilot” just to show everyone how hard it is to change an engrained habit. Have parents and child cross their arms across their chest. Then have them switch the arms so the automatically top arm is now the bottom one and the automatically bottom arm is now the top one. The homework assignment is to see how long it takes to have the new position replace the old. The family will find it is almost impossible. It will always take a conscious effort to switch the arms from the position automatically taken since childhood. The hope is to gain compassion for parents whose automatic response is to get upset and/or yell when a child does something they don’t like and compassion for the child whose automatic response is to refuse to cooperate.

Choosing a Response

Back to the puppets. Using the marionettes, have them dance, lift their arms, legs, etc. Who is in charge of the marionette? The puppeteer, right? The puppet is powerless to do anything. The puppet does not have any ideas of why the puppeteer is pulling this string or that string. How are you like the puppet? Who is the puppeteer? Life's events. Mom, Dad, teachers.

Imagine you are driving a car down the highway and another driver comes speeding past you, swerves in front of you and cuts you off so you have to slam on the brakes? Has that ever happened to anyone you know? What did he or she do? What else could he have done? What else could he have done? He could have done nothing, just ignored it. He could have gotten angry and swore at the other driver. He could have sped up and tailgated the other driver. He could have honked his horn. He could have speeded up himself, pulled up alongside the other driver and made a rude gesture. He could have done any number of things. Whatever he does, something or nothing, it is a choice he is making. The angrier, scared and upset he is the less he has access to his thoughtful brain and the more likely he is to do something guided by his emotional brain. Which part of your brain would you want to have in charge when you are upset? Which brain will help you make the right decision as to what you are going to do? The cause and effect thinking part of your brain or the emotional part of your brain that is on automatic pilot?

So, when you became involved in this situation. What were your response options? Lets brainstorm all of the different things you could have done. They don't all have to make sense. Just think of all of the different ways you could have responded. You had lots of options. Which one did you choose? How did that work out for you? Is it an option you would choose again? How do you access your brain so that you can choose a response instead of just doing the first thing the amygdala tells you to do? Can you take your brain off automatic pilot?

Perspective

Trauma victims often look at life through a lens skewed by their horrific experiences. Helping them to understand and accept that they see life differently due to their abuse helps them gain insight into their world view as compared to the world view of those who have not been abused.

The tool is a set of plastic circles in a variety of colors. It is found in art supply stores for children to play with and see what happens when you apply different colors to different views or objects. The directive is to look at different objects in the room with different colors to see how they are changed. Have everyone look at an object with the green, for example, and talk about what happens to the object under a green lens. Repeat with other colors. Then have everyone look at an object with the color of their choice and talk about what they see. Those that selected the blue paddle will see things differently then those who selected the yellow paddle.

Switch the subject to a benign topic. What the family had for dinner, for example. Point out that each member of the family had slightly different views of the dinner.

Describe a woman leaving her office late at night and walking to her car in the dark. If the woman had been sexually assaulted in the past would she have a different view of how safe she was then a woman who did not have a history of sexual assault? How would one behave differently then the other? How would one feel differently then the other?

Switch the subject to a more upsetting event. Again ask each person, present or not when the event occurred, how they would describe the event, their feelings about it, their

thoughts about it, if the event has changed their life in any way? Note how each person has a different way of thinking about it and talking about it.

Point out that the person who was victimized is going to feel the fear over and over again. While the person who was not the victim, but is empathic, would understand the victim's fear but would not feel fear themselves.

Discuss with the child what lens they use to look at different things and events. Give examples from their past. Help them accept that they look at life differently than those who have not been victimized. They will see situations differently than other members of their family. They will react differently and behave differently and feel differently about things that other members of their family or friends do not give a second thought.

Muse outloud about how long the person who was victimized is going to look at life through the "danger" lens? Is this something they want to get over? Is it something they think they can get over? What can other people in their life do to help them change the lens of fear and danger?

Switching Roles

When no approach seems to be working it is often very interesting to switch roles. After the parents have explained what they believe to be the issue, or describe the behavior that is indicative of an issue, ask the child to relate back what the parent has described. Then switch roles. Have the parents be the child, the child be the therapist and the therapist be the parents. Replay the same conversation with the therapist taking the lead in describing the behavior from the parents' perspective. Turning to the child (now therapist), the therapist (now parent) asks, "What do we do?" The child (therapist) then brainstorms with the therapist (parents) what has been done in the past, what has worked, what has not worked, what could be done, why that would help or not help. Ultimately appealing to the child (therapist) what could be done differently or what perspective needs to change with the parents or the child in order for change to occur. It is up to the child, as therapist, to offer solutions.

Growing Up or Growing Down

As has been mentioned in other areas, at some point in a child's development almost everything they do is age appropriate. What makes behavior problematic is when a child continues in a behavior after most other child their age have matured out of it. Calling this to the child's attention is sometimes useful.

Using the dry erase board I call out different things children do and ask the child to state about what age children do it. We make a chart with diverse activities.....wearing a diaper, eating with their hands, needing to be watched constantly, taking things that don't belong to them, talking gibberish, hitting, grabbing toys from other children, etc. The child then tells me about what age a child is that does that. 2, 1, 3, 4, 2, 3, 4, etc. Then we make a list of his/her behaviors that have been problematic for parents. Soiling pants, stealing, breaking things (necessitating constant supervision), hitting siblings, etc and compare those behaviors and the age at which those things are in line with development. I make an aside to the parents that physical age and emotional age are sometimes not the same. I go over the ages and stages of emotional development, knowing children listen when adults talk.

Turning back to the child I ask him/her to begin to list some of the behaviors his parents find problematic and ask at what age that behavior is developmentally on target. Then looking a little askance at him I say “Do you mean, you are growing down instead of up? That is unusual, however, your parents love you and they can love a 10 year old just as well as a 2 year old. Sometimes kids need to go back to being a baby and start the process of growing up over again.” To the parents I remark that sometimes children get stuck at the age at which they were abused or traumatized so they need to stay that age while they work through the trauma.

In terms of parenting the parents are advised to accept immature behavior and call it out to the child as immature, rather than naughty. Restate over and over that they can love a two year old until he/she decides it is time to grow up. Another parenting issue is finding ways to remove privileges and activities that would be reserved for an older child until the child demonstrates he is ready to set aside his immaturity.

Winning the Battle, Losing the War

Children engage in control “battles” because they think that, regardless of the long term outcome, they have won if they have thwarted their parent’s wishes. What they don’t understand is that they can “win” by not doing what was asked when asked, however, they will ultimately “lose” because the parents will withhold privileges. The child sees the “short term gain”, but loses track of the “long term pain.” At the same time, the parents experience a “short term pain” dealing with the immediate refusal to cooperate, while losing track of the “long term gain” of using the child’s refusal as a “teachable moment”.

Much like during the civil war, the south won many battles.....Ft Sumter, Bull Run, etc. southerners were thrilled at their victories. But they still, ultimately, lost the war of secession. During WWII, the Axis powers won many victories. The Japanese successfully bombed Pearl Harbor. Germany took over Poland and France by winning battle after battle. Nonetheless, despite their victories, they lost the war to the Allies.

Parents and children, alike, can see, if they are able to think metaphorically, that their lives are like that. The child can seemingly win “victory” after “victory”, refusing to do a chore, not going to bed, breaking a toy, etc. But, in the end, the parents determine what privileges the child will have and can, for example, take everyone out for an ice cream cone who has completed their chores, leaving the child with the undone chore at home. The task of parents is to create a reward system where the child wants to do what is asked and a consequence if the child does not. This reward and consequence must be devised in such a way that the only person in the family who does not get the reward and/or experiences the consequence is the child who refuses to cooperate. The rest of the family must not be denied good times because of the actions of one uncooperative child.

Another approach to this discussion is to ask, “Which is more important to you? Making yourself happy or to making others unhappy?”

Observing other kids

Parents know what child is thinking....child can either use words or behaviors

Lack of Forgiveness for self (Mom/child forgiveness interaction)

Whose voice are they listening to?

Can't/Wont

Difference between Unconditional Love and Conditional love

Lack of C & E Thinking

Having to say the same thing over and over

Same consequence over and over

Poor math skills

Brain is playing tricks on you

Two types of memory...Memory of an emotion and emotional memories

Keeping Healthy kids healthy

Tattling on unhealthy child's misbehavior

Homework assignments

There is an old saying, "Not forgiving someone is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die."

Lie 6 Anger makes me more powerful

Healing the brain – exercise, meditation, etc

Zen of therapeutic parenting

Babies need to be born with a "TaDa!"

Someone is boss of you.....do you want to be your own boss and tell you what to do or do you want to abdicate and let mom be boss and tell you what to do

Be your own therapist

Getting child to do chores. Prior to asking him give him chocolate, treat, hug. Tell him to go to his room until he is ready to help out. Get your chore done, go play. Or put it off and not play. You choose

Easy to love/hard to love

Jobs appropriate for yellers – barker, hotdog vendor at baseball park, outside