

# Whose problem is this?

Understanding and responding to challenging and difficult behaviour

## Real Kids, Real Carers

A continuing education resource for foster carers

Written by Paula Hayden and  
Louise Mulrone



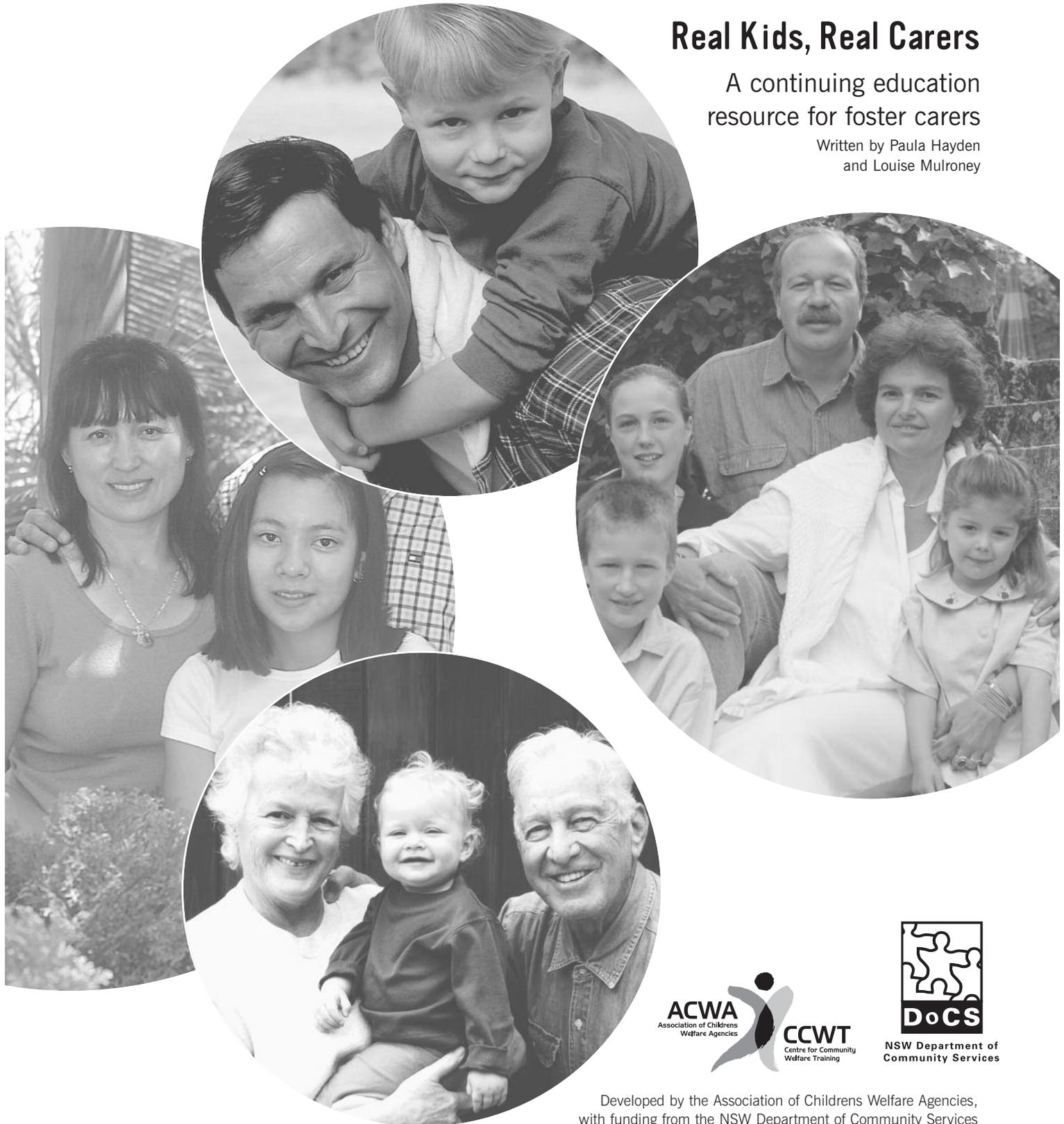
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**ACWA**  
Association of Childrens  
Welfare Agencies



**CCWT**  
Centre for Community  
Welfare Training



**NSW Department of  
Community Services**

Developed by the Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies,  
with funding from the NSW Department of Community Services

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to members of the steering group who shared their experience and provided invaluable guidance and feedback in the process of developing this resource.

- > Andree Borc,  
Centacare Sydney
- > Karen Bevan,  
NSW Ombudsman's Office
- > Debbie Brennan,  
Centacare, Newcastle
- > Jeanne Appleton,  
Wesley Dalmar Child and Family Care
- > Kerry Crawford,  
NSW Department of Community Services
- > Kim Hawken,  
Foster Care Association of NSW
- > Marie Wighton,  
NSW Department of Community Services
- > Pauline Mackiewicz,  
NSW Department of Community Services
- > Robyne Arnott,  
NSW Department of Community Services
- > Ross Smith,  
UnitingCare Burnside
- > Steve Yatman,  
NSW Department of Community Services
- > Sue Madden,  
Anglicare Child and Family Services
- > Sue O'Connor,  
Foster Parents Support Network
- > Sue Smith,  
NSW Department of Community Services

### Particular thanks to:

- > NSW Dept of Community Services for the funding the project to develop this resource.
- > Mhairi Barnes, Manager of the Centre for Community Welfare Training (CCWT), for her constant support and guidance.
- > Nigel Spence, CEO of Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies (ACWA), for his encouragement and advice.

## Additional copies

Additional copies of this booklet can be downloaded from  
[www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/](http://www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/)

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# About Real Kids, Real Carers

This booklet is part of a continuing education resource for foster carers called *Real Kids, Real Carers*.

*Real Kids, Real Carers* contains 6 separate booklets covering topics of importance to foster carers.

## The titles in the series

- ★ Independence and connections: caring for adolescents
- ★ I'm an individual: children and young people with disabilities
- ★ Participation: creating opportunities for children and young people to contribute to decision-making
- ★ Reality fostering: the impact of fostering on carers and their families
- ★ Whose job is this? team work in foster care
- ★ Whose problem is this? understanding and responding to challenging and difficult behaviour

Full copies of all titles in the series can be downloaded from [www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/](http://www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/)

## Using these booklets

Each booklet sets out a two-hour education session. Experience has shown that foster carers are more able to access training that can be completed in a half day or evening.

The learning opportunities will be enhanced if sessions

- > involve an experienced foster carer as part of the training team
- > include agency workers as participants.

These sessions provide an introduction to the topic under discussion, though follow-up sessions may be required to explore the topic in depth.

These sessions are designed for all carers, whether very experienced or currently in their first placement. Children of foster carers, particularly those who are older teenagers and young adults, will also benefit from participating in these education sessions.

## Training resources

These booklets provide detailed guides to all activities, including handout material to be photocopied for participants. Handout material can be found at the back of each booklet.



The booklets include “scripts” for trainers which are indicated by the use of the talking head icon.

Such scripts are not meant to be prescriptive, but provide input material that trainers can use and present in their own style.

# Session information

## Learning outcomes

At the end of the session, participants will be able to identify

- > a range of reasons that underpin the behaviour of children and young people
- > the impact of challenging and difficult behaviour on carers
- > strategies to appropriately respond to challenging and difficult behaviour.

## Material required in session

- > Whiteboard or butchers paper
- > A workbook for each participant, made up of Handouts 1–9
- > Evaluation form for each participant (see the example at the end of this booklet)
- > Resources for carers to borrow from your agency relevant to the topic (eg posters, booklets, videos, agency policies on behaviour management and physical restraint etc)

## Length of session

2 hours minimum

*Training should include opportunities for carers to informally exchange information and build their networks. Ideally training will include additional time allocated for a meal or coffee breaks.*

## Background material for trainers

### Framework for understanding behaviour

The framework used in this session is drawn from the work of Maurice Balson, *Becoming Better Parents*. The fourth edition of this book is available for approx \$20 through ACER (Australian Council for Education Research) on 1800 338 402.

Trainers seeking additional background information can read the introductory chapters of that book.

### Physical restraint

This session includes a brief consideration of the use by carers of physical restraint in dealing with challenging and difficult behaviour. In order to respond accurately to any questions or comments, trainers should be familiar with

- > agency/departmental policy on the use of physical restraint
- > *Critical Events Protocol* prepared by the Children's Guardian (for trainers in NSW).

# Session Outline

## 1. Introduction (15 minutes)

### Activity

**Go around group** (if group members don't already know each other) and have each person say

- > his/her name
- > the ages of the children in their home (foster children and any of their own).

### Briefly introduce yourself

Explain any necessary housekeeping details eg location of toilets, length of session, need to turn off mobile phones, arrangements for refreshments etc.

### Explain group rules

Highlight the importance of

- > maintaining confidentiality ie not discussing personal details about any child, young person or adult in a way that means that other people in the group could identify them
- > respecting other people in the group by listening to their opinions, even if not the same as your own.

### Explain purpose of session

**Distribute workbooks.**

**Go through Handout 1.** Check with participants that the learning outcomes on the top of Handout 1 fit their expectations of the session.

**Explain that today's session is an opportunity to explore** responses to dealing with difficult and challenging behaviour and everyone in the group is likely to have had experiences where child or young people in our care behaved in a very challenging and difficult way.

### Question to discuss

- ❖ Without talking about the actual behaviour, how did you feel when a child or young person in your care behaved in a difficult and challenging way?

## Write up responses

*If any participants start providing details of the actual misbehaviour, redirect their response to the feelings they had in that situation. It is important that the focus stays on responses to the behaviour, and not be an opportunity for participants to swap stories about outrageous behaviour that they have experienced.*

## Provide overview of session

**Highlight the range of responses** and explain that

- > different people have different temperaments and may experience different responses
- > different situations may provoke different responses in a carer
- > this session will help us explore the connection between a child or young person's behaviour and our particular response
- > we can use our initial responses to behaviour to choose effective strategies to deal with the behaviour.

## Question to discuss

At some stage in their lives, all children are involved in behaviours that challenge parents and carers. Children in foster care will often present behaviour that is particularly extreme. Why is this?

*Possible answers may include past experiences of abuse, lack of consistency, dealing with loss and change etc.*

## 2. What motivates children's behaviour? ( 30 minutes)

### Introducing the "Behaviour Whirlpool"

**Explain** that carers have to deal with behaviour that reflect quite extreme situations, and it is little wonder that the behaviour of itself can be quite extreme.

**Distribute and explain Handout 2** "The Behaviour Whirlpool"



"Often trigger events such as anniversaries, contact visits and problems at school can mean that a child or young person responds in a challenging way to circumstances that would not usually cause them difficulty. Sometimes the behaviour can be a response to long standing issues such as grief and loss or other experiences in a child's past.

Sometimes we focus on the behaviour that happens on the surface, without realising that those behaviours are linked to issues that occur ‘under the surface’. We need to be aware of what motivates children’s behaviour so we can appropriately respond to it.

Today we will be trying to look below the surface, to get some ideas about how to make long term differences in how children and young people behave.”

**Distribute and go through Handout 3** “What motivates children’s behaviour?”

### Understanding children’s motivation



“While this information may seem a simplistic approach to understanding children’s reasons for misbehaviour, the four motivations listed do cover most issues usually raised by carers.

This material does not focus on ‘problem children’, but on the reasons behind ‘problem behaviour’.

The examples of difficult behaviours just provide a general guide. Some behaviour listed under one motivation may be used by a different child for another reason.”

### Questions to discuss

- ❖ Does this way of describing behaviour fit in with some of your experiences?
- ❖ Is this a helpful way of looking at difficult behaviour?

*There is a lot of material covered on Handout 3. Take enough time to let people take it in and ask questions about it.*

### Activity

#### **Distribute Handout 4** “Case stories”

Divide participants into pairs, to read through each story and discuss what may be motivating that child’s behaviour.

*Try to make sure that each pair discusses at least two of the stories. Get some pairs to start from the bottom of the page to ensure each story is covered.*

**Get feedback from pairs** by going through the stories one at a time. Make sure that participants focus the motivation behind the children’s actions.

### 3. Responding to difficult behaviour (30 minutes)

#### Explain the difficulties of first responses



“Look again at Handout 3. Under the column ‘reaction from carer’, the common response to particular behaviour is listed.

However, this response, though perfectly natural, is often not the most helpful one from the carer. In fact, it may reinforce the reason behind the behaviour in the first place.

For example, if Jai’s carer is annoyed at Jai for interrupting her he has got her attention and focus – even if it is in a negative way. For many children, any attention is better than none.”

#### Go through Handout 5

Encourage any comments and questions on the “three steps for carers.”

#### Activity

Divide participants into groups of 3.

Ask groups to complete Handout 5 (using the stories on Handout 4) to generate ideas on how carers may respond in a way that is helpful in each situation.

*The first line, “Jai’s story”, has been completed as an example.*

Get feedback from the different groups and note on board any different strategies that are discussed.

### 4. Easier said than done – dealing with your first reaction! (15 minutes)

#### Acknowledge difficulties of managing own behaviour



“It can be easy in a workshop situation to talk about managing behaviour in theory – it is a lot harder in practice!

Even if we can resist our first reaction to challenging behaviour, our strong feelings do not just go away.”

**Brainstorm ideas** that carers have found helpful in dealing with their own emotions, in the short term and in the long term.

*Divide the whiteboard into two, or put up two bits of butcher’s paper – headed with “short term” and “long term”.*

*Tell people they can add any ideas that may work for them to Handout 6.*

## Unacceptable behaviour management strategies



“Physical punishment of children is not permitted within the foster care setting. Any action where a foster carer deliberately physically hurts a foster child may give rise to an allegation of child abuse. Any such allegation must be dealt with and reported by the foster care agency to the NSW Ombudsman.

Guidelines from the Children’s Guardian specify that behaviour management policies of out-of-home care services ban

- > any corporal punishment
- > any punishment that takes the form of immobilisation, force feeding or depriving of food
- > any punishment that is intended to humiliate or frighten a child or young person.

## 5. Dealing with critical/dangerous incidents (15 minutes)

### Explain the term ‘critical incidences’



“Critical incidents relates to behaviour that is dangerous to the child or young person or to others. This is generally behaviour that is destructive or illegal.

In general, the motives behind such behaviour is the same as all other types of challenging behaviour. However, there are some particular points about serious incidents that need to be highlighted.”

Go though **Handout 7**, and ask for questions and comments.

## 6. Putting it into practice (20 minutes)

### Reinforce purpose of session



“It is important to remember that each child and each carer is unique. The next activity provides an opportunity for people to apply some of the workshop material to their own particular situations.

Remember the incidences we thought about at the beginning of this session, when children in our care behaved in very challenging and difficult ways? We now have a chance to look at those type of incidences and apply the information we have shared in this session.”

### Activity

Ask each participant to fill out Handout 8 on their own.

*Explain that the information will be shared in small groups, so participants should not write down any confidential information.*

Divide the group into three's. Get people to share their responses.

## 7. Conclusion (10 minutes)

### Activity

Ask each participant to say something useful that they are taking away from this workshop.

Provide Handout 9 "Discipline principles". Tell participants that while every situation is unique, this Handout may help guide carers with strategies in dealing with challenging behaviour.

### Evaluation

Ask participants to complete and hand in evaluation forms.

*(See the example at the end of this booklet)*

# Learning Outcomes of Session

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At the end of the session, participants will be able to identify

- > a range of reasons that underpin the behaviour of children and young people
- > the impact of challenging and difficult behaviour on carers
- > strategies to appropriately respond to challenging and difficult behaviour.

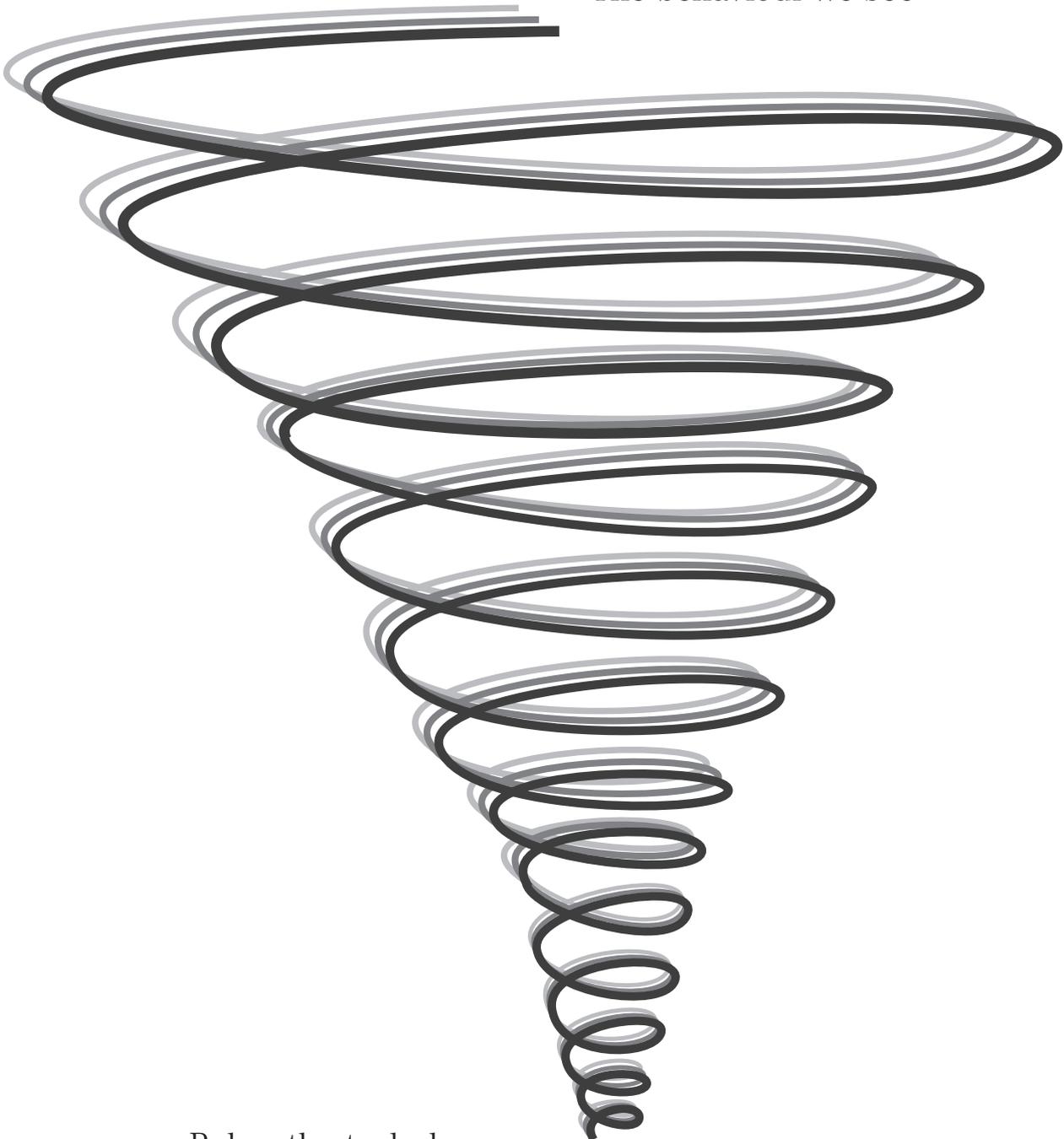
## Session Outline

1. Introduction
2. What motivates children's behaviour?
3. Responding to difficult behaviour
4. Easier said than done - dealing with your first reactions!
5. Dealing with critical/dangerous incidents
6. Putting it into practice
7. Conclusion

# The behaviour whirlpool

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The behaviour we see



Below the turbulence  
*(Why is the child behaving like this?)*

# What motivates children's behaviour?

Children behave in particular ways for a reason. Here are four different reasons for children's misbehaviour.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This description of children's behaviour is adapted from the work by Maurice Balson in 'Becoming Better Parents' published in 1981 by ACER, Victoria.

Type of Behaviour	Message from the child to carer	Reaction from carer	Examples of child's behaviour
<b>Attention seeking</b> (to get carer's attention and focus)	"I want special recognition"	"I feel irritated by the behaviour"	<b>May be active</b> eg clowning, mischief making, constant talking. <b>May be passive</b> eg tearfulness, laziness, untidiness, always wanting to be helped
<b>Seeking power</b> (trying to control the carer)	"You must do as I want"	"I feel like I'm not in control"	This can include disobedience, bad habits, tantrums, non co-operation
<b>Responding to past hurts</b> (provoking hostility in order to be recognised)	"I want to get even"	"I want to get my own back" or "I feel really hurt"	This can include cruelty, destructiveness, stealing, sullenness
<b>Escaping</b> (trying to avoid further hurt or humiliation)	"I am hopeless, leave me alone"	"I feel like giving up"	This can include idleness, refusal to participate or socialise, fantasy activities

# Case stories

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## Jai's story

*Jai is seven. He was removed from his mother's care when he was five as she did not adequately protect him. He had experienced sexual abuse by his grandfather.*

*Jai's carer is Olga. Whenever Olga starts to talk to a friend on the phone, Jai always interrupts her. He demands a drink, wants her to read him a story, needs her help in the bathroom etc. Olga finds it difficult to spend time on the phone and wishes that Jai would play quietly or watch TV while she talks.*

## Karen's story

*Karen is eleven. She has been with Bill and Jo, her foster carers for four months. The care plan indicates that Karen would benefit from developing peer relations. Bill and Jo have tried to interest Karen in all sorts of activities – sports, craft, social – where she might make new friends. Karen shows no interest. Instead she spends hours talking and playing with the family pet, an old Labrador. Bill and Jo spend a lot of time organising transport for Karen to a special day for children with dogs. They wonder why they bothered when half an hour after she gets there, Karen says she has a headache and wants to go home.*

## Robbie's story

*Robbie is twelve. Until last year he lived with his mother and younger brothers and sisters. He often took care of his brothers and sisters when his mother was unwell. She has a history of psychiatric illness.*

*Robbie now lives with foster carers Karyl and Chris. Robbie regularly truants and causes trouble at home by not doing his set household chores. Karyl and Chris find themselves yelling at Robbie a lot and trying to set limits and organise appropriate punishments.*

## Misha's story

*Misha is ten. She was severely physically abused by her step father. She has been with her current carers, Eli and Moya, for three weeks. Misha's first placement broke down after the carer got too ill to take care of Misha. The most recent placement was terminated when the carer was found to have used a belt to hit Misha.*

*Eli and Moya have planned a camping holiday and tried to involve Misha in planning for it. They have talked about the fun of setting up camp near the river. When the time comes to load the car they get the tent from the garage. They are shocked to find that Misha has used a pair of gardening shears to cut big holes in the tent.*

*Moya describes the incident as 'devastating' after all their efforts to help Misha feel wanted.*

# Responding to children's behaviour

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Often our first, instinctive response to challenging behaviour actually reinforces it.

## 3 steps for carers

1. recognise the type of behaviour
2. resist your first reaction
3. respond in a way that does not reinforce the behaviour.

Type of Behaviour	Possible first reaction from carer	Possible helpful responses
Jai's story	<i>Olga is annoyed and snaps at Jai to be quiet.</i>	<p><i>Olga tells Jai she wants uninterrupted time to speak on the phone, and lets him know that she will give him attention soon</i></p> <p><i>Olga sets up some quiet toys for Jai to play with near her when she talks on the phone</i></p> <p><i>Olga concludes phone call and spends some focused time with Jai before her next phone call</i></p>
Robbie's story		
Misha's story		
Karen's story		

# Easier said than done – dealing with your first reaction!

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Our emotions do not just go away. We need to find strategies that work for us to deal with our feelings in an effective way.

Short term	Long term
<i>Count to 10</i>	<i>Make sure I talk to someone I trust about my feelings</i>

# Critical / dangerous incidents

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Critical events relate to behaviour that is dangerous to the child or young person or to others. This is generally behaviour that is destructive or illegal.

## 1. Try to defuse the situation if possible.

There are often points in which a critical incident is developing, where strategic action can prevent it developing any further.

## 2. Ensure immediate safety

Options will vary from situation to situation (depending on age of child, level of danger, previous incidences etc) but may include

- > Ensuring possible targets, including yourself, vacate the area
- > Call for support from agency staff, using emergency or 24 hour contacts if necessary
- > Putting a behaviour management plan into action. (In some cases this may include pre-agreed arrangements to seek help from local police, mental health team etc)
- > In a few situations, immediate safety may require physical restraint in line with agency policy.

Physical restraint is not the same as physical punishment. It must be used within strict guidelines, including that

- the purpose of the restraint is to stop the behaviour when there is risk of injury to the child, young person or someone else
- restraint should be at the minimum level required to stop injury happening
- restraint should stop as soon as it is safe to do so
- whilst restraining a child or young person, the carer should talk quietly and gently to the child or young person, explaining why they are being held and how they will let them go as soon as the danger is past.

*Handout 7 continues on next page >>>*

**3. After the incident is finished and the child and you are safe, plan how you will deal with the issues underlying the situation.**

This should include all of the following action.

- > **Discuss the incident with the child or young person**, including their perception of events, your concerns and the consequences if similar incidents happen in the future. Try to end this session on a positive note.
- > **Get some personal support for yourself.**  
This should include some immediate debriefing. You may also need to get ongoing assistance to reflect on your thoughts, feelings and responses after the immediate impact of the events is over.
- > **Decide who needs to know about the incident, and make any necessary reports as per your agency policy.**
- > **Work with others in developing a management plan** that includes ways of minimising the possibility of such a situation arising again.

# Putting it into practice

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Think of a time when you had to deal with difficult or challenging behaviour.

1. How did you initially react to the behaviour?

.....

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2. What may have been the motivation behind the child or young persons's behaviour? *(You can refer to handout 2)*

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.....

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.....

3. In dealing with the behaviour...

What might you do the same?

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.....

.....

What might you do differently?

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# Discipline Principles

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*This material has been adapted from Alberta Family and Social Services as reproduced by True Colours Training Centre, Alberta Canada.*

## All discipline should be:

### **Positive**

Focus on what the child does well, not just notice the negatives.

### **Encouraging**

Reinforce positive behaviour eg privileges, rewards and treats.

### **Communicated**

Ensure child/young person knows of limits and consequences eg setting contracts.

### **Consistent**

Do not threaten or warn of actions on which you are unprepared or unable to follow through. Appropriate actions may include extra chores, making restitution, withholding privileges etc.

### **Current**

Deal with the present, do not dig up history.

### **Behaviour focused**

Focus on behaviour, rather than criticise the child in general terms.  
Do not attack the child/young person's personality.

### **Immediate**

Do not draw out the process of responding to difficult behaviour.

*Handout 9 continues on next page >>>*

## Discipline Principles (Continued)

### Weighed

Govern your discipline. Did the child intentionally misbehave or was it an accident?

### Related

Relate discipline to the misbehaviour. For example if withdrawing a privilege, do so immediately or use natural consequences.

### Appropriate

Use discipline that takes account of the

- > child's age, development, understanding and cultural background
- > nature and the impact of the incident
- > child's previous experience of abuse.

### Followed up

Hold and/or talk to the child/young person following any discipline. Make sure they feel loved, wanted and secure.

## What foster carers can't do!

The regulations for foster care agencies requires behaviour management policies of out-of-home care services to **ban**

- > any corporal punishment
- > any punishment that takes the form of immobilisation, force feeding or depriving of food
- > any punishment that is intended to humiliate or frighten a child or young person.

# Evaluation Form

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Workshop topic .....

1. Overall, how would you rate the workshop?  
(circle the number that best matches your rating)

1

2

3

4

5

6

Poor

Excellent

2. What was most useful part of the workshop for you?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. What was least useful?

.....  
.....  
.....

4. What will you do differently as a result of this workshop?

.....  
.....  
.....

5. Would you recommend this workshop to other carers? (tick one)

Yes

No

Why?

.....  
.....  
.....