Choose to Love

Ariel Davis & Haley Gallaway
Timberline Elementary
The Connected Child
by Karyn B. Purvis Ph.D, David R. Cross Ph.D, and Wendy Lyons Sunshine
Pages 5-8
Compassion as Your Touchstone

We’d like you to visualize a scene: Imagine that you raised your own healthy biological child in a loving home until he was four. Then somebody kidnapped him and you didn’t know if he was dead or alive for three long years.

During those years, your baby boy was starved and abused. When he is finally, mercifully, returned to you at the age of seven, he is more like a wild and frightened animal than the curious and playful little boy you knew. Grateful to have him back and sensitive to his suffering, you focus on doing whatever he needs to heal from his trauma. You don’t take him to the amusement park on his first day home, or bundle him off to day care within a week. You know
that he needs weeks and months of daily nurturing and retraining to comfort, guide, and heal him from that harmful experience.

Although the scenario we’ve described may sound extreme, adopted and foster children deserve similar compassion. The lives that many of them have endured were more difficult than we can fathom. With compassion, you can look inside your child’s heart and recognize the impairments and deep fear that drive maladaptive behavior—fears of abandonment, hunger, being in an unfamiliar environment, losing control, and being hurt. Compassion helps us to have more realistic expectations and understand that a child isn’t necessarily being willful or belligerent—he is just trying to survive the best he can within his mental limitations and social understanding.
Compassion will help you be tolerant of a child’s deep neediness, and to be forgiving when he or she doesn’t understand something that seems so basic, like how to sit at a dining room table with a family, how to use toilet paper, or how to read people’s facial expressions. Compassion will help you forgive a child for being manipulative, because you understand that before she came to your family she had to survive by her wits, and manipulation is a learned survival technique. Keeping compassion as our reference point encourages us to have the patience and stamina to keep trying on the toughest days.

Deep down, these children want desperately to connect and succeed but don’t understand how. As parents, it’s our job to show them.
A Bridge to the World

When an infant is born with a condition such as cerebral palsy, the mother can be ferocious in getting care for her child. It is that child and her mother against the world; they are a team. The parents know that the child’s issues are not a personal assault on them—the child certainly didn’t intend to be palsied.

But with children who suffered prenatal or early trauma before adoption, those lines get blurred. This child won’t look obviously disabled or impaired, so his disruptive behaviors can feel like an assault. Then it becomes a vicious cycle. The harmed or impaired child either “acts out” (by screaming, spitting, biting, hitting, or lying) or “acts in” (by withdrawing, hiding, running away, getting depressed and sullen, or becoming unresponsive). Some children actually do both, at different times. You might retaliate with punishments or isolation, and then your child re-experiences her original abandonment, rejection, and loneliness all over again. She feels trapped and continues to make poor choices.
At-risk children can easily feel alienated and cornered, alone against the world. Feeling that way, it is almost guaranteed that they will come out fighting, manipulating, or fleeing. Then, the only adult attention they receive is endless scolding and punishment. Soon this dysfunctional dynamic becomes a habit, and the children learn to seek familiar and available attention by acting out. What a scary and miserable way to live!

You have a unique opportunity to change that scenario by building a bridge to the world for your at-risk adoptive children. You and the rest of your family can become a safe haven and an ally, eager to share their concerns.
We encourage you to have the mind-set that it’s you and your child facing the world, ready to resolve whatever problems arise. Convey your deep alliance not only in words, but through body language, posture, and voice. We suggest you look in the mirror, and ask yourself: Am I shaking my finger at her? Is my jaw set and are my hands on my hips in an aggressive posture? What message is my child taking at the primitive level? Is it the child against me—or is it her and me together?

We have watched children and their families make tremendous progress in surprisingly short periods of time, but sustaining those gains takes commitment and a fundamental shift in parents’ perspective. Instead of seeing yourself as the victim of a pint-sized terrorist; begin seeing your role as a compassionate, nurturing guide
and ally for your little one. Respect and honor the child’s needs, even when you don’t entirely understand what drives them.

We never accept hurtful or wild behavior from a child—but we also do not punish, reject, or bribe because those strategies don’t build long-term success. Instead, we calmly and firmly interrupt bad behavior, identify the need that drives this behavior, show the child how to achieve his or her goals appropriately, and then praise the child for doing so.
Once you see yourself in this role of mentor, encourager, and protector, days become filled with opportunities—opportunities to show your child how to correct his mistakes, to practice doing the right thing, to communicate needs with words instead of behavior, and to get positive feedback for his efforts. As you help your child build social skills and feel safe in this world, you earn his deep trust. When your child feels truly safe, doors swing open to positive change.
Think about “That kid”....

- What role have you had with this child?
  - Have you been the victim?
  - Have you been the punisher?
  - Have you been the encourager, mentor, and protector?
- What need are they communicating about?
- What have you done to connect with them?
- What have you done to foster connections with peers?
Let’s chat!

Tell us what you are experiencing or looking for so we can all put our heads together to find solutions!
Resources

Google Folder - visual cue cards, visual stories, behavior tracking logs, connection ideas, etc.

Conscious Discipline Comedy Skits

Trauma Toolkit