

Why Behavior Modification Does Not Work with Kids in Foster/Adoptive Homes

By Lindsey Ondrak, LMHP

Over the last ten years I have been working with children and adolescents in different settings including in-home, outpatient, residential, a foster-care agency, and with a camp for abused and neglect children. I began to notice over time that traditional methods of what would usually work for kids, even simple rules, consequences, and rewards didn't usually work. I began to dive deeper into understanding how attachment works with biological, adoptive, and foster parents. I think that the obvious is often overlooked. All kids in foster care or who have been adopted have experienced trauma, or what we often are now referring to as complex trauma. Trauma affects the brain the same no matter what it is beginning in-utero.

Juli Alvarado from Alvarado Consulting & Treatment Group believes that parents need to be educated on three parts of the brain to understand what is going on for your child:

1. The Amygdala, or the fight or flight part of your brain, is activated when there is a threat in your environment. It functions at an unconscious level and is driven by your five senses. The brain filters the information to what is the most important and decides what matters. This is fully functioning at birth. I like to think about how I felt when I almost stepped on a snake last year. I was sure I woke up all of my neighbors at 7:00am screaming and running into my house. My instinct in this instance was not to freeze, but to get the heck out of there.

2. Next, the Amygdala tells the Hippocampus "help" and it sends cortisol around the brain like a blanket. The problem is that the hippocampus doesn't know when to say no, so even if a threat is just perceived the hippocampus will still send out the cortisol, which can literally suffocate the brain. The hippocampus is fully formed by a child's third birthday so before this time it is still developing. Increased cortisol can affect a child's higher level of thinking and decision making (cause/effect). In early stages of development the amygdala hijacks the hippocampus and it doesn't develop that thinking so while a child is physically growing their brain is not developing properly. "You can take the child out of the trauma but you cannot take the trauma out of the child." So we remove a child from an unhealthy environment and place them in a healthy environment and expect that they will just respond "normally." Parents use behavioral modification with the child and it doesn't work so what happens? We consequence the child thinking they will learn. Truthfully, you may be expecting them to do something you think they should be able to do, but they may not be able to. If you are familiar with children in foster care or adoptive homes, how many times have you heard that this child is 12 years old, but developmentally maybe 6. So if we are treating a 12 year old, with a 6 year old brain like a 12 year old, chances are progress will be minimal.

3. Yes I am almost done with my soap box, hang with me. The Orbital Frontal Cortex is the commander of the brain or like a control center for social and emotional engagement. When all the above things are happening we have a dysregulated brain and see a decrease in executive functioning, regulation, and attachment. A dysregulated brain cannot do two things: LEARN and ATTACH.

If behavior modification does not work what do I do?

Create sensory experiences that calm your child. Parents, case workers, and others often ask why my first goals are around calming a child and not addressing their trauma. What is failed to see here is that this is addressing the trauma. If you cannot regulate your child there is no increase in attachment and safety or calming the brain or what the trauma has created. What can you do at home right now? When you are dysregulated, first regulate yourself before addressing your child. If you are not regulated, do not expect they will be. Then respond slowly and in a normal voice (not too high and not too low – tone is VERY important). Teach them and connect with them. How do you know what they can or cannot do? Ask yourself what am I doing that is working and what is not working. As you work on your relationship together positive behaviors will follow.