The Language of Trauma

By: Heather T. Forbes, LCSW

When reviewing records of many of the children with whom I work, I am forever perplexed at one particular notation I continually see written by therapists and counselors. Under the list of negative traits of the child, it is often written, "Child exhibits attention-seeking behaviors."

I strongly believe that children seek attention because they NEED attention. Nature has designed children to be completely dependent on their parents at the moment they are born. A baby crying is the signaling to the parent the baby has a need—a need that the baby cannot satisfy on his own. The baby is indeed exhibiting attention-seeking behaviors.

The natural flow of the developmental journey of a child is to gradually release this need for attention, moving from a state of dependence to a state of balanced independence. The time period for this is about 18 years. We are the only animals in the animal kingdom that have our children under our care for this length of time. Expecting our children to not need our attention or to view it as a negative behavioral issue during these 18 years goes against our biology.

When children do not know how to verbally express their needs (which is predominately the case during early childhood), they “speak” through their behaviors. In other words, behavior is a form of communication. When a parent can stop, pause, and “listen” to the behavior of a child, it can become quite obvious what the child is saying. Looking at the behavior from an objective perspective also unveils the logic behind the child’s behavior. Here is a list of ten behaviors along with an interpretation of each behavior to demonstrate this:

1. **Slamming Doors.** When a child begins slamming doors, it is an indication that he does not feel like he is being heard. By slamming a door, he is making loud noises, hence forcing the parent to “hear” him. He is essentially saying, “I need to have a voice and I need you to listen to me now!”

2. **Cursing.** Most children know that they should not curse. They use profanity to jar the parent’s nervous system into listening. It is a way to get a parent to respond to the child, even if the response is negative. The child’s fear of not
being good enough for the parent to pay attention to him, is also playing out in such a scenario.

3. **Shutting Down.** A child who shuts down, refuses eye contact, walks away, or gives the parent the silent treatment is a child who is overwhelmed. We have traditionally labeled a child like this as defiant. This is a child who is saying, “Life is too big to handle. I’m shutting down my world in order to survive.”

4. **Hitting Sibling.** Sibling rivalry is more about the relationship between the child and parent than it is between two siblings. If a child is not feeling secure in his relationship with his parent(s), he will perceive the sibling as a threat to this relationship with the parent(s). Reacting against the sibling is the basic game of “King of the Hill” in order to win the attention of the parents. The child may receive negative attention from the parent (“Billy, stop picking on your brother!”) but to a child, especially a child with a trauma history, any form of attention, whether positive or negative, is love.

5. **Challenging Authority.** A child who challenges authority is a child who has lost his trust in authority figures. Look back into the child’s history and you will likely see a child who was abused, neglected, or abandoned by someone who was supposed to care for and nurture the child. A child who fights having someone else in charge, is a child saying, “I can’t trust anyone. It is too much of a risk.”

6. **Saying, “I hate you!”.** Such hurtful words directed towards a parent from a child are simply a window into the child’s heart. The child is projecting his self-hatred and self-rejection back onto the parent. What he is communicating is, “I hate myself!” It is easier to hurt someone else than it is to feel the internal hurt within one’s own heart.

7. **Arguing About Everything.** A child who argues about everything and anything is keeping the parent looped in a conversation in order to keep the parent attuned to him. He feels that if the parent were to stop talking with him, he would cease to exist. Arguing is his way of staying connected. It is a negative form of attachment.

8. **Laziness.** Describing a child impacted by trauma as being “lazy” is a gross misinterpretation of the child. Profound laziness is typically a sign of a child who experienced helplessness early in his childhood; it is a learned behavior. Neglect happens when a child tries to elicit attention from his caregiver and the result is nothing. No attention. No help. Zilch. The child learns that his energy does not produce results and as he grows older and gets challenged by life, he will simply shut down and do nothing. He is saying, “My efforts don’t produce results so therefore I won’t even try. It’s just not worth it.”

9. **Pushing Every Boundary.** Many children have such intense behaviors that the adults around them in the past demonstrated a lack of ability to handle them or an unwillingness to stick with them. When parents find their child pushing every boundary, every rule, and every limit, the child is asking, “Can you really handle me?” and “You say you’re my parent, but I need to know you’re not going to give up on me so I will test you to make sure you really are committed before I put any trust into you!”
10. **Becoming Unglued During Transitions.** Trauma happens by surprise and when it happens, there is typically a major change in the child’s life. It is transitional trauma. The aftermath of such traumatic experiences is that the child becomes fearful of EVERY transition, whether large or small. A child’s belief around transitions becomes, “Something bad is going to happen. Guaranteed.” Past traumatic experiences create the black and white thinking that “All change equals pain.” When a parent sees a child’s negative behaviors intensifying during a transitional time, the parent needs to remember that the child is saying, “I’m so scared that my entire world is going to fall apart in a flash just like it did in the past!”

Children’s behaviors are perfectly logical. The issue is that we’ve been looking at the behavior from our logic, not the child’s logic. Before judging the behavior as either “right” or “wrong,” look at it first from a literal perspective and ask yourself, “What is he/she trying to communicate with this behavior?” When you understand the communication behind the behavior, it will give you the solution you need to find a loving, nurturing, and relationship-based solution to the behavior.

By meeting the child’s underlying need that is activating the behavior, it opens the opportunity for you to help your child correct his behavior through teaching moments. Teaching children how to communicate their needs is the key. For an adopted child who has been impacted by trauma, it takes a tremendous amount of courage to come to a parent and say something simple like, “Mom, I need a hug.” or “Dad, I don’t feel like you’re listening to me.” Their traumatic histories of rejection and abandonment have left a blueprint that says not only will their needs not be met but they might be rejected for voicing their needs. Turning this blueprint around and helping them to rewire their brains to know that asking for their needs is exactly what you want them to be able to do.

Neuroscience tells us that the brain is ever changing and neuro-plasticity tells us that the brain has the ability to continually formulate new connections. In the past, it was believed that once we were hard-wired one way, we simply had to accept what we were given. However, brain scan imaging shows us that we are actually creating new connections all the time and this is even more true for children during their developmental years. Taking the time to “listen” to your child’s behavior and then teaching your child how to ask for their needs will help them to be better equipped neurologically to have a more positive long-term future.

However, when parenting a child with challenging behaviors on a day-to day basis, taking the time in every interaction to first listen to the behaviors takes a tremendous amount of time and emotional energy. Life happens and it is easy to lose sight of the idea that behavior is the language of a child. Negative behaviors are tiring and parenting adopted children who have been impacted by trauma makes this even more intense! Thus, it is imperative for parents to take care of themselves first. Their needs are equally important: you can’t give something you haven’t received yourself. When parents can keep their cup filled, they will
have enough space inside of them to keep looking beyond the behaviors and listening to the behaviors instead of reacting to the behaviors.

The parent/child relationship is a dyad - a two-part system. So parents, remember that your behavioral response also signals a communication to your child. Thus, it is imperative for you to stay mindful and attuned. Give enough attention to yourself as to stay in a place of love so you are always speaking the language of truth, love, and acceptance to your child in return.

To find out more about the Beyond Consequences parenting approach or to purchase a copy of one of this author's book, please visit www.beyondconsequences.com

Heather T. Forbes, LCSW, is the owner of the Beyond Consequences Institute and author of numerous books on the topic of working with children impacted by trauma. Coming from a family of educators, Forbes has a passion for helping children in the classroom. Trauma robs children of their curiosity and her passion is to help these students return back to their innate love for learning. She consults and lectures extensively with both general and special education schools around the nation. Her signature style is to bridge the gap between academic research and "when the rubber hits the road" classroom situations, giving teachers and school personnel the understanding and tools they need for even the most challenging of students. Forbes has worked in schools with trauma-impacted students and knows first hand how challenging it can be on a day-in and day-out basis with these students. Additionally, much of her insight on understanding trauma, disruptive behaviors, and developmental delays, also comes from her own experience of raising two internationally adopted children and mentoring a severely trauma-impacted young adult.

Books by Forbes:

2. Help for Billy: A Beyond Consequences Approach for Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom
3. A Study Guide for Help for Billy: A Chapter-By-Chapter Workbook for Teachers (co-authored with Jim Sporleder)
4. The Trauma-Informed Curriculum for Social-Emotional Learning: Preschool Through Early Elementary (co-authored with Kara Rogers, LICSW)
5. Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children With Severe Behaviors, Volume 1 (English, Spanish, and Russian versions)
7. Dare to Love: The Art of Merging Science and Love Into Parenting Children with Difficult Behaviors
8. 100 Daily Parenting Reflections