

DECODING BEHAVIORS EXERCISE 3



Pathways to
Permanence 2

Parenting
Children
Who Have
Experienced
Trauma
AND LOSS

Session 5
Creating
Positive
Attachments
Part 2

Exercises

Purpose: To assist caregivers in recognizing how their emotions may be “triggered” in response to their child’s behavior, and to develop skills in managing those feelings while addressing the problematic behavior of the child.

Time: 20 minutes total

1. Instruct participants to look at the first behavior, “Sneaks food” on their exercise worksheet. *(All steps may be repeated for the second behavior if time allows.)*
2. Ask participants to take a few moments to reflect privately on their emotional reaction to this behavior. For example, the caregiver’s emotional response might be sadness as she/he thinks about the child’s previously unmet needs for food & care; frustration if the behavior is continuing even after much reassurance has been given to the child; even anger if the food budget is tight and the child has eaten up leftovers intended for the evening meal! Emphasize to participants that they are identifying their first gut reaction to the behavior, without analyzing or judging their feelings. Have them write their emotional reaction to the behavior in the Adult Trigger/Self-Check column on their worksheet.
3. Ask participants if anyone would like to share their emotional response. If no one is comfortable sharing their response, be prepared to use an example from the completed table for this Exercise. Allow some brief discussion of the emotions that get triggered in caregivers by their children’s behaviors, without passing judgment on those emotions.
4. As a group, brainstorm some self-care suggestions that can help when a caregiver is feeling “triggered” by their child’s behavior. These might include taking deep breaths, counting to 10, etc. Discuss with the group the value of taking this type of moment for oneself before addressing the child’s behaviors. Ask participants to actually use one of those techniques, such as taking 5 deep breaths before proceeding with the rest of the exercise.
5. Ask participants to remain reflective and notice their reactions as they look at the information in the next few boxes. Ask participants the following questions: “Having taken a moment to notice and calm your first reaction to the behavior, is it easier to decode the unmet need underlying the behavior? To have an empathic response to the child? To think of corrective actions that can teach the child new skills?”
6. As a group, brainstorm suggestions for the Increase Pleasure box for “Sneaks food.” Remind participants that the Increase Pleasure activities take place in between instances of negative behavior, to fill the buckets and meet the unmet needs for a child with this behavior.
7. Wrap up the exercise by asking participants if identifying their own emotional triggers was helpful to the process of decoding this child’s behavior. By being aware of their own feelings and taking a moment to calm themselves, were they better able to understand the unmet need underlying the behavior and feel less reactive to it? Did that also help them to think of ways to increase pleasure for a child who engages in this behavior?