

# Now What?!

**Advice and support for  
caregivers who embrace  
children in extreme need**



**Fostering Great Ideas**  
Ensuring a brighter tomorrow.

*It is okay to admit you are struggling with the care of a child. You will find that many others are struggling too.*

*The children can heal from their past neglect or abuse, but their healing and your capacity to help them heal requires a strong team approach.*

*We hope this booklet and our on-line community provide significant support to you.*

*We also pray birth parents heal from any guilt or shame and, if appropriate, become a key member of the child's care team.*

Fostering Great Ideas (FGI) developed the scenarios in this document. FGI works with social services, licensing agencies, therapists, and adoptive and foster parent associations to develop support groups for caregivers in need.

Please contact us at [dwhite@fgionline.org](mailto:dwhite@fgionline.org) or [www.fgionline.org](http://www.fgionline.org) to begin the conversation in your area.

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# Now What?!

## Advice and support for caregivers who embrace children in extreme need

Caregivers who receive a child take on great uncertainty and may feel they are on a roller-coaster ride, and can't get off. These caregivers need significant support from other parents (peers), therapists, and the larger community.

As a caregiver reading the following scenarios, you may be reminded of your own experiences. Consider discussing the scenarios with other parents, ask for guidance from a professional, and join our online support community.

### Scenarios

- **Look at Me! Look at Me!** (*attention seeking*)
- **R-E-S-P-E-C-T** (*disrespectful*)
- **Lions, Tigers, Bears - Oh My!** (*anxious*)
- **10, 9, 8, Blast Off!** (*impulsive*)
- **Down and In** (*extremely sad*)
- **My Own Private Island** (*aloof, unattached*)

# Look at Me! Look at Me!

Pat thrives on negative attention. He lives to irritate other people (he especially likes to get under my skin). Pat will be slow as molasses when we need to get somewhere; he will be in my face when I need to concentrate.

Tantrums, attitudes and irritating behaviors last as long as he feels attention is on him! I can't ignore this; his behaviors affect others and slow me down considerably.

Punishing him only works some times. Does he like to be punished? It sure feels that way.

## What he thinks he wants:

Attention (negative or positive, it doesn't matter which)

## What he really needs:

- Security and belonging
- One on one communication with a primary caregiver (missing that from early years of life)

## Pointers:

- Don't show frustration (Pat loves your frustration). More than most people, Pat will hear your tone of voice more than what you actually say. He is very aware of how his actions affect others emotions.
- Don't get sucked in (Pat wants to irritate you).
- Pat needs to know the boundaries in your home and at school up front. Discuss consequences before Pat gets in trouble.
- Engage Pat with a playful spirit – he needs the healthy interaction – he is like a toddler in this respect, regardless of his age.
  - Begin with short term activities such as reading a book or playing a game together. Focus on eye contact and being fully with the child.
  - Close out the activity before Pat decides to disrupt the intimate, quality time with inappropriate or aggravating behaviors. Each time, increase activity length as the child is able.
- Hug Pat after his blow ups.
- Punishment becomes a game – stick with simple consequences (don't escalate; move on).
- Point to Pat's positive qualities (how thoughtful he is, how helpful he is). Everyone has positive qualities and Pat needs to learn to take pride in his.

# R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Sarah doesn't care who the adult is. She lives to defy my authority. And if she can defy me with other people around, all the better for her. Sarah's as sweet as candy when she wants something; her attitude is hard to swallow when she ignores me and the rules of my home.

Attitudes, yelling, manipulating behaviors last as long as Sarah feels all eyes are on her! Every home needs rules and I am the parent. There is no bending on this.

Consequences just make her attitude worse. She needs to learn, there is no other way.

## What she thinks she wants:

Freedom! (from you and every other authority)

## What she really needs:

- Security and belonging
- A healthy interest in some positive outlet (activities, schooling, outreach); this will give her a sense of control, pride, and purpose

## Pointers:

- Consider this: Sarah feels that authority figures have failed, hurt, and abandoned her. Defying authority, even yours, may help her feel safe. Patience is a must! If you are safe, she will begin to trust you one day.
- Try for a team approach. All adults need to lend their support to you (in front of the child). You are the caregiver and deserve respect.
- Work together with child to come up with solutions:
  1. Inform child of your rules and why they are important (don't blame; just inform).
  2. Ask the child what they want from a caregiver (ask them not to blame, just lay out what they want). Re-state what the child stated, to validate and confirm.
  3. Together, work out a solution that meets needs of adult and needs of child.
  4. Repeat often!
- Punishment becomes a war of control – stick with simple consequences (don't escalate; move on.).
- In a respectful tone, help her understand the outcomes of her defiant behavior. Don't condemn her for her behavior. Just let her understand there are alternatives with better outcomes.
- Show you care about Sarah – not by giving in to her desires (new clothes, different food, me me me), but by showing you care (surprise her with a gift, stand by her when hurting, show pride in her as she develops interests).

# Lions, Tigers, Bears - Oh My!

Ava appears insecure. Behind manipulating behaviors, anxiety over her situation, and “love” sometimes directed at just about anyone, is Ava just a scared child? There may have been trauma in her background, but now she is in a safe place.

She doesn't appear comfortable. We have plenty of food. She is given what she needs. We give her fun, safe activities. Our family wants to love her, dearly.

I don't fully trust Ava. I admit. She can be sneaky. What is she up to? Does Ava see us supporting her? Does she even care? I honestly doubt it.

## What she thinks she wants:

Relief (immediate; from perceived threats)

## What she really needs:

- Security and belonging
- Validation of her worth – you are a wonderful child

## Pointers:

- Reactions from prior trauma or severe neglect can be difficult to understand. An anxious child may cling to you, and later, move away. She may hurt herself or run away. She may steal things, or take food and hide it, even when all needs are provided for at your home.
  - Remind Ava she is important to you.
  - Tell Ava, “I know you must hurt from things in the past. I am here for you. I will do my best to take good care of you.”
  - Help Ava learn relaxation techniques, and practice regularly! Reduce tasks that appear stressful to her. Provide significant structure and maintain good sleep routines.
  - Develop consequences for inappropriate behavior, even behavior that may seem she has no control over. Develop in advance and together, with Ava. Make sure you both agree, so that she does not feel shamed when consequences happen.
  - After consequences, ask if you can hug her. Give her your love. She is worthy, regardless of her actions.
- At school, why would a child blow up in front of her class when the teacher merely asked a simple request? A suspension may not solve the problem for a child who has experienced trauma.
  - Ava needs an advocate (you), not to excuse her issues, but to help others understand that Ava perceives reality - authority, rules, change - differently. Ava needs a teacher who speaks calmly, softly, and at eye level. Ava needs a teacher who does not focus on confronting her, and chooses to guide her to a “safe place” to calm down, when needed.

# 10, 9, 8, Blast Off!

Ron acts first and thinks later. Actually, he just acts first. He doesn't include anyone in his decisions. I just pick up the broken pieces later on. Ron frustrates me (and makes others shake their heads) because he doesn't consider how his actions affect the rest of us.

Spontaneous, impulsive, irrational. Will he ever stop and tell me what he's thinking? Will he ever follow through with appropriate decisions? School issues, stealing, further troubles – this is the path he is walking down.

I pour my heart into him, trying to guide Ron. It goes in one ear and out the other. How do I stick with him? I want to, but shouldn't he be improving? Is he just stubborn?

## What he thinks he wants:

Control (over his life)

## What he really needs:

- Security and belonging
- A fully committed mentor to guide him

## Pointers:

- Consider finding a committed mentor to guide Ron. The mentor should be chosen by the child, not by his caregiver, school, or social worker. The mentor should be trained to not pity the child, but to be a team player.
- Recognize you can only do so much to help Ron in his impulsivity; he needs to want help. Right now, he may just do something, even if negative, to gain certainty/control.
- Build a team to support Ron - a team not focused on his negative behaviors but on this: "You are capable of so much. Make your own path in life. We will be with you."
- Children from neglect may not see they have a meaningful past. They are a "victim" only or they don't want to view the past, not even the good stuff. They are just in the "go!", "now!", impulse stage.
  - Help Ron remember his past. Ask case managers for a picture of Ron when younger – they may have something in file or could ask a family member. With a therapist, discuss how to help Ron express grief.
  - Help Ron develop a life book. Ideas can be found online, or just start putting together a scrapbook with pictures and mementos from your home and from prior school or activities (mascot badges, soccer ball sticker, etc).
- Practice structured activities, where Ron has to learn to wait, take turns, follow step by step directions, or plan ahead (play a board game, follow a recipe, or build a lego or craft project).

# Down and In

Natasha is in a glass box. I can see her face, but I can't reach her. I need some response, as her caregiver. She closes off from me. Does she need more drugs or less? Is therapy a solution? She needs to open the box, but she won't or she can't. Sometimes I throw up my hands.

Depression? Feelings? I feel her pain at times, but I need a response, just to function in this family. Responses can be angry, against me, against herself. Will she find her way out of this?

I listen. I try giving solutions. Does that work? Not really. I can't open the glass box. When will Natasha heal? We need to move on.

## What she thinks she wants:

Numbness (there is no alternative)

## What she really needs:

- Security and belonging
- A caregiver who cares about Natasha's feelings more than caring about changing Natasha or getting her out of the glass box (Natasha wants to know someone is with her in her darkest place)

## Pointers:

- Natasha has feelings. She has difficulty expressing these feelings as her glass box closes in. Removing herself from the world is a long-standing, self-preservation mechanism.
  - Give her a gift of your love, let her know you care, without words. This could include giving her flowers, giving her a moment to breathe without you in the room, giving her a nice meal, giving her your ear.
  - Don't give her solutions. Don't ask her to get over this. That is your own frustration talking.
  - Offer her a journal, informing Natasha that no one will read it, ever.
- Ask Natasha to acknowledge that you both need improved communication. Ask if you can have a special time each week, in a place away from others, to just talk.
  - Follow through! Even if there is no issue, and despite the business of the day, this weekly time together needs to remain.
  - Try hard to see Natasha's side. Pay attention and acknowledge her voice. You may be so excited she is talking to you that you start talking, and taking over the conversation; this will close her up. The time is for her, not you.
- Engage in simple activities together that require interaction (baking, craft, board game, gardening); this can help dialogue and can start building up a relationship.
- If Natasha moves out of her glass box, you may become very excited. Don't make her self-conscious by announcing "I'm so proud of you for talking"! She'll move towards the glass box again.

# My Own Private Island

Sam is on his own. Warm feelings towards others is not a concept he often expresses. Sam is our child in care, but I'm not sure how he feels about this arrangement. I'm not sure he would tell me his underlying feelings anyways.

What can I offer Sam? I ask him, and he seems uninterested. Is he fearful of having relationships? Would he prefer to not be bothered with "the rest of us"?

Honestly, I've rarely worked so hard and received so little love in return. I'm becoming exhausted. What can I do at this point that I haven't already tried?

## What he thinks he wants:

Isolation

## What he really needs:

- Security and belonging
- A full team approach, with a clinical focus; defining the reason for Sam's isolation may be difficult

## Pointers:

- Sam may have a social phobia. It may be more extensive, with him expressing a lack of empathy towards others. It could be that he is grieving his losses and has become withdrawn. It could be simply he is scared, away from family. It could be he has an autism spectrum disorder. At this point, we don't know.
  - We do know Sam needs to learn to bond with another person (probably you). Have him with you at all times. Hold out your hand for him. Let him see you as his "safe connection."
- Engage in one-on-one activities together that require interaction (baking, craft, board game). Pick a small goal to aim for, remind Sam to go for it, and be there when Sam feels discouraged.
- Establish your authority. Teach Sam what right looks like and what wrong looks like. Reinforce his good behaviors.
  - Depending on severity, you may not be able to connect on an emotional level, but you can still teach right from wrong.
- Make sure you engage in activities outside of caring for and worrying for Sam. Your health is really the critical point, as moving Sam off his "own private island" may prove a monumental task, and exhaust you regularly.
- Find a support team. Name them, give them roles. Ask for their full commitment - place them in a room together and ask each to commit to Sam's success. Require them to meet quarterly with you for updates, crying, support, and celebrations.

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