

Chapter Four

Disarming The Fear Response With Felt Safety

Six-year-old Janey didn't have much of an appetite during the day at school, but later, when her ADHD stimulant drugs wore off, she would become ravenous. One evening she asked, "Mommy, I'm hungry, can I have a Power Bar?"

Busy in the kitchen preparing a large meal for the family, her mother replied. "No, sweetheart, in ten minutes we're going to eat the chicken and vegetables I'm fixing for supper."

Janey exploded into tears and began shrieking, "I hate you! I hate you! You are so mean. You are a mean mother! You never let me have anything!" The little girl ran into her bedroom, slammed the door, and began to sob loudly.

Horrified, Janey's bewildered and disappointed mom couldn't imagine what had triggered the outburst.

Disturbing behaviors – like tantrums, hiding, hyperactivity, or aggressiveness – are often triggered by a child's deep, primal fear. Youngsters like Janey can be physically safe in their new adoptive home, but past traumas encoded within their brains are easily reactivated. Hunger, abuse, or abandonment that occurred months or years ago can still trigger terror, which in turn leads to out-of-control behavior. Chronic fear is like a schoolyard bully that scares children into behaving poorly. Parents might easily confuse fear-based outbursts with willful disobedience, but they are not the same thing at all.

Deep fear caused Janey to explode into tears when she was denied the snack bar. To the little girl who spent a painfully hungry year in an orphanage, the promise of

dinner in ten minutes was no real comfort. She remembered going to bed hungry every night after orphanage workers ignored her pleas for food. Even though Janey's mom understood that good food was coming shortly and her daughter was in no danger of starving, the traumatized, primitive part of Janey's brain just couldn't grasp that. Starvation is encoded her deepest memory. When refused a Power Bar, Janey panicked, fearing she would die of starvation.

Helping A Child Feel Safe Builds Trust

You can take an important step toward eliminating tantrums and misbehaviors – and enabling learning and positive family relationships – by providing an atmosphere where your children feel and experience safety for themselves. This strategy is called providing “felt safety.” This means that you arrange the environment and adjust your behavior so your children can feel in a profound and basic way that they are truly safe in their home and with you. Until your child experiences safety for his or herself, trust can't develop, and healing and learning won't progress.

How might Janey's mother have responded in a way that provided “felt safety,” without spoiling her daughter's appetite for a home-cooked meal? Here's how:

“Mommy, I'm hungry, can I have a Power Bar?”

“Yes dear, you may have a Power Bar, and you may eat it right after supper.”

(Mother puts the bar into her daughter's hands.) “Do you want to put it beside your plate on the dinner table, or to keep it in your pocket until dinner is over?”

This simple act would reassure Janey in a visceral way that she won't go hungry. She still isn't permitted to eat until dinner time, but now she can touch the food and know it is hers to eat. Deciding whether to put the bar on the table or keep it with her helps Janey feel more in control of the situation and lets her practice self-control. Small choices like this are comforting to a traumatized child, and build trust.

Just to underscore the penetrating depth of food-related fears, consider that even as an adult, one highly acclaimed Academy-award winning actor always carried a candy bar in the pocket of his suit, no matter where he went or what he did. He once fished it out and showed it to an interviewer during a TV show. His exceptionally impoverished childhood left him with such a fear of hunger that fame and fortune could not erase it, even decades later.

When Fear Is In Control

A fearful child focuses strictly on survival issues like...

Safety

Hunger and thirst

Fatigue

Escaping scary situations

Making hurts stop and go away

Staying in control

A scared child cannot grasp...

Discussions, sermons, or lectures

Complex reasoning, logic, or stories

Philosophical discussions or abstract concepts

Solving puzzles or mathematics

The primitive brain's "fight, flight, or freeze" fear response can make a child...

Run away and hide

Lash out physically or verbally

Get angry or cry

Stonewall and become unresponsive

Try to control the situation

Remember

Fear will bully your child into poor behavior

Disarming The Primitive Brain's Fear Response

If a child feels threatened, hungry, or tired, her primitive brain jumps in and takes over. Physically located in areas of the brain such as the amygdala, this primitive brain constantly monitors basic survival needs and behaves like a guard on patrol. When the primitive brain is on duty, more advanced areas of the brain – particularly those which handle higher learning, reasoning, and logic – get shut down. Helping a child feel safe relaxes and disarms the primitive part of a child's brain. We purposefully soothe and disengage the primitive brain so it won't bully the child into poor behavior.

When a child feels genuinely safe, the primitive brain lets down its guard and allows trust to blossom and bonding to begin. Parts of the brain which control higher learning can operate. Children who feel safe are free to heal and become secure, trusting children.

Providing an atmosphere of "felt safety" disarms the primitive brain and reduces fear. It is a critical first step toward helping your child heal and grow.

Chronic Fear Causes Hypervigilance

Reducing fear can even minimize behaviors like agitation and constant movement, similar to those seen in attention deficit disorders. We have encountered many harmed children who are not truly hyperactive, but instead are hypervigilant. This occurs when children were so traumatized by abusive and unpredictable caretakers or situations during their earlier lives that their primitive brain remains locked in a state of high alert, keeping them perpetually on guard. The “fight or flight” stress hormones continue to rage through their bodies and set these youngsters in motion, making them fidget endlessly, unable to sit still and focus on any single activity, because they’re constantly scanning their surroundings for danger.

With careful observation, you can detect physical symptoms of hypervigilance, a state of chronic anxiety. For example, the dark centers of the eyes, the pupils, are often enlarged in hypervigilant children, even during minor stressors or when a child seems calm. For other youngsters, the effect is reversed, making their pupils look unnaturally tiny. Either extreme indicates an imbalance in the stress response system.

Another sign of hypervigilance is rapid heart rate and racing pulse. If you put a gentle hand over the heart of your child when you speak to them, you can detect this. Some children’s hearts beat wildly, even while they appear to sit calmly in your lap.

Building Trust

Underneath everything you do with your children, you need to reduce their fears and convey the fundamental message that that they are safe. Here are some tips:

Offer consistent care so that your child gets the message that:

“A safe adult will take care of me and protect me. My needs matter to this adult.”

Offer warm interaction so that your child gets the message that:

“I do not need to be afraid of this adult. I am a person of value to this person.”

Be responsive so that your child gets the message that:

“This adult understands what I feel. I am safe here.”

Earn a child’s trust by:

- Consistently showing emotional warmth and affection.
- Offering positive emotional responses and praise often.
- Responding attentively and kindly to your child’s words and actions.
- Interacting playfully with your child.
- Physically matching, or mirroring, your child’s voice and behavior.
- Being sensitive to your child’s tolerance for sounds, touch, and personal distance.
- Respecting your child’s need for personal space.
- Using simple words or language they understand.
- Giving your child advance notice of upcoming change.

I did the round of psychologists, neurologists, all the early childhood intervention disciplines and everybody’s got a theory. Everybody has an answer or solution for a child that’s hyper, and it might be medication or changing their diet or a program with occupational therapy. You go down all these paths that exhaust you financially and emotionally, and she’s still the same way.

I’m so astonished that I got to where I was, letting an at-risk, impaired 3 year-old run my life and my other child’s life. I got in a pattern of making life easier for Cindy. I was thinking ‘I don’t want to demand too much of a challenged child,’ so I kept lowering my expectations and widening the margin for her to fail. That loosened the reins on her, and she got more and more anxious and unable to focus.

I'm very, very lucky that Drs. Purvis and Cross came in and said 'She can do better than that,' and not with medication. She is capable of a lot more than I expected.

Now I'm in control and she trusts that I'm in control, so she has deferred to me. We sit and do things. We can play a game; we actually played a matching game. I was astonished; she matched up all the animals and patterned them, and put them two by two into the ark. I've never known her to sit down that long. I am not joking. I didn't even know she knew her animals... What I've learned was that her endless energy was actually endless anxiety.

-- Mother of 3-year old Cindy and 6-year old David, both adopted domestically at birth

Reducing Stress Improves Behavior

Cortisol is a hormone which is activated by and responds to stress. Cortisol levels normally rise and fall at varying times of the day, but when children have too little or too much cortisol in their body over an extended period, it can cause serious problems.

By helping your child feel safe, making their world more predictable, and teaching them better coping skills you can actually optimize cortisol levels and allow your child's brain to work better. We documented this effect in over 50 at-risk youngsters at our day camp. Before attending camp, these children's morning salivary tests revealed twice the normal levels of cortisol, corresponding to their chronic experience of stress.

During the first week of camp, their morning cortisol levels remained high. By the second week, however, cortisol had fallen by half, dropping to levels considered normal for children of this age. Cortisol remained at this lower, healthier level until the end of camp, due to the reduction of stress.

These children received no medical intervention; they were just actively engaged in a safe, playful, and multi-sensory camp environment that addressed their emotional

and physical needs. Cortisol reduction was excellent news, because chronically high levels of cortisol are actually toxic to the cells in the brain.

An analysis of our research data showed that those campers whose stress dropped most significantly (as shown by significantly decreasing cortisol levels), also had the biggest gains in language use. The Comprehensive Receptive and Expressive Vocabulary Test results illustrated that these children didn't suddenly understand more words – but now they could communicate more. Certain children made stunning progress, gaining years worth of verbal self-expression in one month of camp.

We suspect that reduced cortisol is behind a great number of positive changes we have witnessed in campers, including spontaneous language development, regular smiling and joyfulness, better behavior, improved social skills, physical growth, and new attachment behaviors.

Strategies That Reduce Chronic Fear

Use the following strategies throughout each day to help your child feel and experience safety on a deep level:

Alert Children To Upcoming Activities

Children with special needs feel safer when they know what will happen next. So make their world predictable by announcing or describing a task ahead of time.

Prepare your child for what's coming up by saying things like:

“In fifteen minutes, we will put away the toys and get your bath.”

“In ten minutes, we're leaving to go shopping.”

“In five minutes, we'll get ready for bed.”

Before visiting a new place, like a mall, tell your child about it. When you arrive, explain that there are many stores here, and that you will be visiting one

with shoes in it. By announcing your plans and explaining the child's environment, you help make her world less frightening.

Important: Before you leave your child to go to work, on an errand, or for some other absence, remember to explain where you are going and when you will return. Details about your planned absence will reassure your child and reduce the possibility of an uncontrolled fear response. Don't try to slip away hoping to avoid a scene, because that strategy is sure to backfire and undermine your other efforts to increase trust. Your child simply won't feel safe once he discovers that at any time you might leave him without warning.