

*Tips and Tricks
for Working with Children
in Residential Treatment Care*

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for Working with Children
in Residential Treatment Care

A Guide to Help You Be More Effective
In Your Advocacy Work with Troubled Children

First Edition

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Healing Embrace

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This guide is dedicated to all the child advocates out there who wear their hearts on their sleeves, who do the work about which others say:

“I just couldn’t do that. I don’t know how you do it.”

You do it out of compassion. That’s how.

This guide is also dedicated to all the children whom we serve, those “little angels” who are doing their best in spite of the difficulties the world has unfairly imposed on them.





They didn’t ask for it.

***Disclaimer:** This guide is intended to help youth care workers, especially those with no or little experience in the field, be more effective in their work. It should compliment, but not replace, the training and policies your employer or licensing agency provides to you. If any of our suggestions conflict with what your employer or agency requires of you, or of what your own common sense tells you, then follow their guidelines or your own sensibilities, not ours.*

Furthermore understand that the advice we offer we have acquired from real world practice in our field. We are not, however, licensed therapists, doctors, researchers, or clinicians of any sort. We are simply advocates on the front lines of residential treatment care with extensive, hard-earned experiential knowledge to share.

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Introduction

Experienced child advocates and parents will probably already be familiar with most, if not all, of our child care tips and techniques. To them, these are common sense methods.

Compiled through years of hard-earned experience with children in residential treatment and foster care, these tips and techniques follow a practical approach to effective therapeutic child care. If employed consistently, they will make your job as a direct care worker a lot easier and will be of immense benefit to your clients: These methods will help you to stabilize the behaviors of your clients, enabling the therapists and clinicians to more effectively focus on therapy.

The first and most important tip of all is this: Be realistic about your job. Understand that your clients have been shaped by a difficult life that has filled them with much anger, distrust, and anxiety, and their behaviors reflect those explosive feelings. Many of them now operate in a volatile survival mode that has them expressing their emotions through a fight or flight response—rage, aggression, antagonism, running away—rather than through civil and open communication. Moreover, organically caused conditions such as ADHD and bipolar disorder in these kids pose yet greater difficulties for you to handle. As a result, if you've had no prior experience with this population, your clients will be a much greater challenge to work with than you probably ever imagined.

In many cases, your clients' life experiences have also caused them to loathe and exploit the weaknesses of others, including adults. Rather than befriending you innocently, as you'd expect, your clients will develop a superficial relationship with you and will constantly look for opportunities to exploit your naiveté to gain something they want. Limit testing is natural in all kids, but with this population, think of it as limit testing on steroids.

But you can't hold these behaviors against them, as they express them for the sake of meeting their needs and wants, even if they don't consciously know

what those needs and wants are. Yet, you can't let them get away with these behaviors either. You must hold them accountable for them while also teaching them better ways of expressing their feelings and getting their needs met.

Be especially cautious of falling into an "all they need is love and hugs" mentality—doing so will be to your peril. For, you'll only end up disappointed when a number of the kids trample all over your open arms, as they recognize—consciously or unconsciously—your pity and naiveté as weaknesses to exploit. This approach is a good way to burn out quickly.

Additionally, there are professional boundaries to which you must adhere. These are in place for your protection as well as for the protection of your clients. For, an innocent hug to you may mean something far more sinister to a child who has been sexually abused, and it's not difficult to imagine the complications such a simple misunderstanding can incite.

What's more, coddling is simply not what these children need. The reality is you cannot undo years of trauma, chaos, and loss through hugs and tears of pity. You just can't. We know this truth from years of direct experience.

In fact, you should do your best to refrain from pitying your clients while on the clock. For, you can't effectively help them if you're preoccupied with feeling sorry for them. When you let your heart trump your head in this work, you become ineffective at enforcing rules and structure—two of the most important things these kids need while in your care. What's more, your pity can have the unintended effect of reinforcing their anxieties by rewarding those feelings, instead of diminishing them by not fueling them when they surface.

(Also, think about this: When you pity the kids and ache to give them hugs and sympathy, are you yearning to meet their needs or your own?)

As well, as soon as these kids detect you pitying them, they will exploit your well-intentioned emotions and manipulate you in order to violate the rules.

And when you actually try to enforce a rule you've heretofore allowed them to break, they will become angry and aggressive toward you and very likely physically attack you. We're not kidding. We've seen it happen many times over to a number of new workers in residential treatment care.

In fact, with time you'll come to realize a surprising phenomenon: the adults who are the most consistent and amply firm with the kids—that is, most dedicated to consistently enforcing rules and structure—are the ones whom the kids most respect and seek acknowledgement and sincere attention from. In stark contrast, the "softest" adults—that is, most willing to yield to the demands of the clients and allow them to bend or break the rules and the structure—are the ones they most target for manipulation and with aggression.

We don't wish to paint such a pessimistic picture of these kids. Our intention is not to make them all out to be little monsters that can't be trusted—far from it. They are all innocent victims of other people and of circumstances, and our mission as advocates is to genuinely improve the quality of their lives. But, we do you and your clients a great disservice if we don't reveal a *realistic* picture of our work. If we try to sugarcoat the true nature of our work, then you won't be prepared for the job. And your clients will ultimately suffer, as you may do them more harm than good, despite your noble intentions.

The good news is, however, that if you follow the tips and techniques in this guidebook, you can actually create positive relationships with your clients based on mutual respect and compassion—but only if follow these guidelines, as they are your shortcut to success in this field. For, they represent the wisdom that normally takes years to learn in this profession.

Trust us. We know these things firsthand.

Best of luck,

David & Brent

Tips and Tricks for Working with Children in Residential Treatment Care

✦ Safety is your number one priority.

Always be vigilant about keeping your clients safe. Without safety, nothing else matters.

Safety starts with always paying close attention to the environment and modifying it when necessary. Every potentially hazardous detail on the unit—from the smallest loose screw to a sharp corner—should be scrutinized and amended. Also make sure that doors are shut and locked to keep clients out of prohibited areas and that potentially dangerous items, such as scissors and pens, are always accounted for.

You must also keep the clients safe from themselves and from each other. Every client has the right to live without the risk of being verbally or physically threatened or harmed. So always be quick to prevent or break up altercations before someone gets hurt.

Finally, your organization should have strict professional guidelines in place for the interactions between you and your clients. Make sure you follow these guidelines, as they're in place for your protection as much as for your clients' protection.

✦ Always start out firm when first meeting and getting to know a client.

By firm, we mean to be calm, assertive, consistent, and fair—and to not let the clients engage in misconduct without consequence. As Cesar Milan, "The Dog

Whisperer," puts it, you must be the pack leader; this mantra applies to working with children, as well. For, "tough love" from strong adults is actually what these kids need and, deep down inside, want. Tough love makes them feel safe because you, the adult figure, are in charge. Conversely, when you're not in charge, some of the clients will act out from anxiety and insecurity, and some will take advantage of your powerlessness and will disrupt the milieu, creating more anxiety, impulsivity, and aggression all around.

Especially when they first get to know you, your clients will test you and power struggle with you. But the more proactive, confident, and assertive you are in response, in the long run the more they will accept your limits and the more secure they will feel. And don't give up! It may take a while to finally establish yourself as a pack leader, but if you continue to project yourself as one, eventually you'll become one.

In contrast, one of the worst things you can do is to coddle your clients, for it only reinforces their anxieties and dysfunctions by feeding them when they manifest. Plus, you can't appropriately help a client when you're feeling sorry for them. What's more, it's infinitely better to start out too hard on a client than too soft, for it's so much easier to loosen up from a firm baseline than to try to toughen up from a weak and ineffectual one.

Another mistake you can make is to constantly yell at your clients. Not only can yelling retraumatize them, but it also has the effect of provoking them to yell back. Yelling encourages power struggles, as it immediately puts your clients on the defensive.

Your best approach is to be calm yet firm and assertive, confident in your demeanor, unflappable in your resolve, and unyielding with the rules and limits of the program. That's the true spirit of tough love.

🦋 Let out your nurturing side only after establishing yourself as a firm yet fair adult.

Once a child knows you are serious and clearly respects you—after a few days to a couple of weeks of firm yet fair enforcement of rules and structure—then you can "loosen the reins" a bit and reveal a more nurturing side. Now you can let the minor transgressions slide and focus primarily on the behaviors that clearly require addressing. For, now the child knows that when you speak up, you really mean business.

Take heed, however, of these two caveats of nurturing your clients:

1. If you start out trying to be a nurturer before establishing yourself as a pillar of strength, you'll have a potentially impossible time earning the respect of your clients, no matter what you do. For, they'll always see you as weak, ripe for manipulation and an easy target for their aggression.
2. You can't effectively help your clients if you feel sorry for them. For, you'll always see them as victims of their circumstances and you'll make excuses for their negative behaviors. But if they don't learn the concept of personal responsibility, then their capacity for empathy will suffer and they will surely fail in life, as their transgressions will always be someone else's fault. And you will have contributed to them becoming that failure.

Prefaced by appropriate "tough love," however, the expression of your nurturing side is the time when you can really bond with your clients and reap the intangible rewards of working with troubled children.

🦋 Be consistent. Always.

Always consistently enforce the rules and the structure as they are; do not amend them to appease the demands of any one child (unless there is a directive from a

supervisor or clinician to do so). That way, both you and the children will always know where the limits resolutely stand, reducing the number of power struggles you'll have to fight. You may be tempted to give in and bend a rule to placate a child for the moment—and it may work out well for the time being—but in the long run it will only teach the child that he can make demands and have them granted regardless of the rules.

Plus, these kids thrive on consistency and become anxious and volatile when the program and rules constantly fluctuate, for unpredictability provokes the clients' fear of the unknown. Consistency, on the other hand, ensures harmony. Consistency is a beautiful thing, for it makes your job easier in the long run.

✂ **The kids will get away with what you let them get away with.**

This is a saying that makes its rounds among experienced direct care workers, for they know the reality behind it: *The kids will get away with what you let them get away with.* It's true that if you enforce the rules and limits consistently and resolutely, almost without exception your clients will become compliant. They may resist you initially, but if you hold your ground, they will yield to your will, rather than the other way around.

When you let your clients violate a written or implied rule even just one time, you'll discover that many of them will push the limits and try to get away with a worse misdeed the next time. (You know the saying: *Give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile.*) Some kids can handle a long "rope," but others will require a very short one. So, use sound judgment when deciding how much freedom to afford each client, for many of them just can't handle the autonomy.

If in doubt, remember to be consistent and always enforce the rules at face value. That way, you can always blame your "heartlessness" on the rules.

🦋 **Focus on the qualities you want, not just the ones you don't.**

It's important to address your clients when they're not being compliant. However, when you spend all of your time focusing on what they are doing wrong, wrong is what you'll get. It's what you're channeling in your mind and through your conscious and unconscious actions, so it's what will manifest.

But if you spend ample time focusing on the good behaviors your clients display, as well as the ones you'd like them to display, then you'll see an increase in those behaviors. For, you feed the behaviors to which you give your attention. So, feed the bad, and bad you'll get; nourish the good, and good will grow.

Also, when you address a negative behavior, it helps to offer a positive alternative. That way, the last thing you tell a child is the right way to do or handle something. And as they say, people have better recall of the last thing they're told.

🦋 **Be proactive and nip problems in the bud. This could be the most important tip of all.**

Be proactive and meet the needs of your clients immediately—for if you ignore their needs, they can escalate into significant problems. Once their needs reach a boiling point, it's a whole lot harder to meet those needs through positive means.

For example, if a child wants a little attention, it's a lot easier to give him positive attention the first couple of times he says something provocative rather than to wait until he has actually offended someone and created an argument. (*See the section on Redirection below.*)

Furthermore, try to anticipate the needs of your clients. If you know ahead of time that a client will need something later, such as something to do in his room in the morning before it's time to come out, get him some activities ready before

he needs or asks for it. Then, in the morning, give him those things to do before he becomes disruptive and wakes up the other kids. Being proactive at all times will help you avoid many potential headaches later on.

Redirection is a brilliant proactive measure.

Redirection works beautifully when employed properly. However, many new and experienced direct-care workers alike can be mistaken when it comes to the term “redirection.” Redirection, as many of us think, is not the act of reprimanding a client for a behavior or telling him to stop. Rather, redirection is the act of diverting a child’s attention from their present behavior or activity into a totally different behavior or activity. It’s sort of like catching the child off-guard with a non-sequitor, channeling his focus from one thing to another and helping him completely forget about the undesired behavior he was displaying, or was about to display.

The alternative focus could be something completely unrelated to the undesired behavior. For example, when you see a child getting agitated over something, you might ask him, “Hey, Chuck, what are you going to do for your birthday?” The question throws him completely off his train of thought into a topic of pleasure for him. It also provides him with positive attention.

The redirection can also be a communication of the behavior expected of the client. For example, you might tell a child who is being disruptive, “Chuck, it’s time for a quiet activity. Please find something quiet to do. Come on, I’ll help you.” The redirection diverts him from the undesired behavior to the desired one, without having to tell him, “Be quiet!” And it offers him your positive attention.

Redirection often works great because it can be much easier to redirect a client to a new activity rather than to directly address the undesired behavior. The latter can often have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the undesired

behavior rather than ceasing it, because you've focused on it rather than on a positive alternative.

 **Hurdle help helps to avoid outbursts of frustration.**

Ever try to do something on your own and no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't do it? For example, have you ever tried to fix an error in your computer software and were simply unable to solve the problem? How frustrated did it make you? Didn't you just want to throw the computer out the window? If you had an expert there to help you, however, wouldn't the problem have been so much more tolerable—or no problem at all, really—and your blood pressure a nonissue?

With our clients, even the simplest task can be a nightmare. From making the bed to completing a homework assignment, these basic undertakings can easily send our clients into a downward spiral culminating in an outburst that we, as staff, may or may not recognize as emanating from frustration.

So, try to be extra perceptive when a client acts out after engaged in a task. It could just be that she's frustrated and her imperfect impulse control has gotten the best of her. It's at this point that we should step in and offer what's called "hurdle help," the act of helping a client get over a hurdle. It's easy: just say, "Come on, I'll help you. Together we'll get this thing done."

Better yet, be proactive and offer to help a client before the frustration sets in. If you know a client struggles and becomes obstinate, say, whenever it's time to make her bed, offer to help her make it from the get-go. Prevention is the best medicine, and hurdle help is a super tonic.

✧ Avoid power struggles as much as possible—but if you find yourself in one, win at all costs.

Never, ever let a client overpower or outlast you in a power struggle. Once this happens, the client will see you as weaker than him and will then engage you in power struggles all the time—because he knows he can win.

Of course, many power struggles are avoidable; and figuring out when you can avoid one is a matter of becoming more experienced and using good judgment. For now, just know that there are times to pick a battle and times to let a minor thing slide.

For example, when you first get to know a child, hardly let anything slide; over time, as that child clearly respects and listens to you, then it's okay to make some exceptions from time to time, especially as rewards for positive behavior. But never lose a power struggle you get dragged into, for if you do, you'll suddenly find yourself being tested by that kid in ever-escalating battles.

✧ Be neutral to keep your edge.

When you are correcting a child's behavior, it's usually best if you maintain a neutral affect—that is, a neutral facial expression and tone. By remaining neutral, you are not reinforcing the undesired behavior or attitude.

If you respond with great emotion, however, then you have taught the child that his negative behavior has power over you. And with these children, you can never let them get a leg up on you, unless you enjoy power struggles and chaos.

🦋 Just planned ignore 'em.

Planned ignoring is the intentional disregard of a negative behavior. Just like maintaining a neutral affect, using planned ignoring can work like a charm to stop a behavior. Because you aren't feeding the child's behavior with your attention, the child soon loses interest in displaying that particular behavior.

Planned ignoring should be used only with a behavior that can be ignored safely. Do not ignore a behavior that puts anyone at risk. Also do not ignore a behavior that is instigating or encouraging the other clients, unless you can convince them to ignore it too.

🦋 Offer great praise when a client complies with your direction or otherwise displays positive behavior.

As we've previously stated, direct care workers can often get in the habit of focusing their attention on negative behaviors at the neglect of positive ones. It's important, however, to acknowledge and reward the positive ones as much as possible. These are the moments when you should be nurturing your clients, thereby reinforcing their positive behaviors with responses that make them feel good.

Conversely, it's important to withhold nurturing when they're displaying negative behaviors. Nurturing them at these times will only reinforce the undesired behaviors, encouraging more of these behaviors in the future.

🦋 Never, ever undermine your coworkers.

Unless absolutely necessary for the client's safety or wellbeing, never override a coworker's decision regarding a client without first consulting with that

coworker. Unilaterally overriding a decision undermines your coworker, stripping his or her authority in the eyes of the child. Think of how you'd feel if your coworker did this to you. (If you're a supervisor or clinician, please take special note of how your decisions can potentially undermine your staff, making their jobs harder and breeding resentment toward you.)

✚ Always back up your coworkers in front of the clients.

You must work as a team to be effective. Never, ever disagree with a coworker in front of a client—the client will only exploit this division or learn poor conflict resolution skills from it. If you disagree with something a coworker has done or said, take that coworker aside and discuss it in private or get a supervisor to mediate—in private. The clients must always perceive you and your coworkers as a unified front.

✚ Never start a battle with a child you can't finish.

Don't do or say something to set a client off, especially at the end of your shift, and then leave your coworkers to clean up the mess. You will breed great resentment toward you if you do. If you simply must say or do something that has the potential to provoke a client, make sure that you can personally handle the repercussions.

✚ If a child asks you a question—such as can he have a particular item—and you don't know the answer, then the answer is "No."

Other appropriate responses include these: "I'll have to consult with my coworker (or supervisor) before I can give you an answer"; and, "You'll have to take that up with the person who gave you that information, for I know nothing

about it and therefore cannot make a decision on it." Also, do not hesitate or waver in your response. The more assertive and swift you are with your response, the more likely the child will accept it without protest.

But if the child does protest after you offer one of the contingent responses above, tell her, "Okay, if you keep that up, the answer will definitely be 'no.' I won't bother checking with my coworker. And that will be my final answer—no ifs ands or buts about it."

Always be professional.

This tip should be a no-brainer. But for some people, it's unfortunately not. Just remember that these kids are watching and learning from everything you do, whether you realize it or not. If you want them to behave, you'd better do the same. It's okay to have fun and even be childlike (*note: not childish*) in your personality, but remember this: you're the adult, and so if you want the kids to respect you as one, you must conduct yourself as one.

Control the environment to control behavior.

Look around and see what traps are set that can contribute to unnecessary problems. Are all doors locked that lead to areas the clients should not be able to access? Are the lights dimmed and TV and voices turned down at bedtime? Does the decor suggest care or apathy toward the clients? Are items that can be thrown or used to stab put away or left out for easy access? Are you allowing a hostile client to set off his peers, or can you move him to another area? Think about how the environment can be altered in advance or during a crisis to calm the clients and keep them safe.

Give them choices or find a suitable middle ground.

Oftentimes, getting a child to follow a rule is about giving her a choice. It's a compromise that can make her feel empowered yet enables you to obtain compliance. The choice can be between something undesirable and something acceptable, or between two options that are acceptable to you.

For example, you can often get a child to follow a rule by saying, "Okay, you have two options right now: one, you can continue to ignore the rules, lose points (or privileges), and take a time out (or be grounded); or two, you can do what you need to do, earn your points, and get back to following the program. What's it going to be?" If she chooses the former, don't be hesitant to follow through with the consequences. That way, you'll soon get the reputation among the kids that you don't "mess around," and they will be much more likely to choose the right option in the future. What's more, make sure both options are things you can actually follow through with; don't give a child an option you have no intention or ability to actually enforce.

As well, sometimes a child will simply not accept any of your offered choices. When this occurs, you have a couple of responses: One, you can tell the child that if he doesn't make a choice, you'll make the choice for them; again, make sure you can enforce the choice you select. Or two, you can find an acceptable middle ground. Ask what the child wants, and then figure out a way to give the child some aspect of his request but in a way that does not allow him to think he's got the upper hand. *(Note: never ever let a client think he's got the upper hand, or that client will believe he can walk all over you.)*

Uncover the root cause of a behavior.

Try to always understand the root cause of a behavior, and then address it appropriately. A kid may act out a particular time just to be mischievous; another time he may act out because of the anxiety he feels over a significant issue, such as traumatic memories that have been surfacing during therapy

sessions. Each of these behaviors will require a different approach to properly address.

However, know also that certain behaviors are acceptable and other simply are not, no matter the cause. Also, part of our job is to teach our clients better ways to cope with their emotions. So if a client is expressing a particular feeling in an unacceptable way, let him know so and teach him the right way to express it.

Do not make empty threats.

That is, do not threaten to give a child a consequence you cannot actually enforce. For example, do not direct a child to take a time out if your employer has a hands-off policy that prohibits you from being able to physically force a child to sit in time out—such as "The Supernanny" teaches—should that child refuse to do so on his own. Once the children realize you make empty threats, they will stop taking your threats seriously.

Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Along with not making empty threats, you should always follow through with your stated consequence if the child doesn't comply. As we said in the choices/compromise section above, following through with consequences will earn you a reputation among the children as someone serious about enforcing rules and structure. Not following through will earn you a reputation as a pushover.

Furthermore, if you ever promise a child a reward or something else positive, please follow through. Not much disillusion a child more than dismissing or forgetting about something good you've promised him. These children have endured so much disappointment in their lives, including from some really

awful people, that you'll just end up yet another uncaring adult in a long list of them. So, you can either be a hero or a zero—it's up to you.

Bribes do not work.

Want to set yourself—and your clients as well as your coworkers—up for failure? Then attempt to use bribes to motivate your clients. Bribes simply are not an effective solution to achieve compliant behavior. They may work once or twice, but then the client will likely demand them again and again; and she may even continuously raise the stakes, each time demanding more in exchange for being compliant.

Instead of offering a reward for the client *to not do something*, try this: create a plan to provide a reward only when the client exhibits the compliant behavior on her own or on the first time she is given a direction. If she doesn't display the compliant behavior *on your terms*, then ensure that any reward is now completely out of the picture and only a choice between a consequence and no consequence remains. But never give a child a reward for not doing something negative. Bribes are a plan to condition escalating hostility and aggression—and long-term failure—in the child. (*Remember: nurture only positive behaviors, not negative ones.*)

Don't try to be their friend—because the truth is you can't be.

Many new direct care workers make the mistake of trying to buddy up with their clients. They seem to think that they can get their clients to be more compliant if the clients like them or if the worker conspicuously portrays that he or she understands and empathizes with the clients.

The problem is, however, that when these children fail to see you in the clear and unambiguous role of an adult, they actually don't feel secure with you. And then

they will act out more frequently as a result of their insecurity and anxiety or as a way to exploit your weakness.

You simply can't be their friend; you must be the adult in charge. You must be, as Cesar Milan puts it, the pack leader.

✂ Please use “please” when giving directions, and then wait five seconds for compliance.

(Note: This tip comes courtesy of the CARE program of the Trauma Treatment Training Center of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center; see www.cincinnatichildrens.org/TTTC for more information.)

Simply adding “please” to a direction said in a neutral tone (monotone), and then waiting five seconds for the desired response, increases compliance. In contrast, rushing a child and repeating directions over and over only decreases compliance.

Also, this technique works best when you give only one simple direction at a time instead of compound directions. It also works best when the direction is stated in the positive—that is, without saying “do not do such-and-such,” as the child's mind will reflexively focus on the part after “do not,” thereby reinforcing the undesired behavior.

Here are some examples of effective directions stated in the positive:

“Tommy, please give me that book.”

“Jenny, please go to bed.”

“Bobby, please *be quiet*.” (Instead of: “Bobby, please *don't* speak loudly,” which focuses his mind on the “speak loudly” part of the direction, reinforcing this compulsion to speak louder, not softer.)

“Cindy, please *put away* your toys.” (Instead of: “Cindy, please *don’t* leave your toys out,” which reinforces “leave your toys out.”)

Be able to say “thank you,” “I’m sorry,” and “it was my fault.”

Being able to say “thank you,” “I’m sorry,” and “it was my fault,” when appropriate, serves at least two positive purposes:

- It models appropriate behavior. If your clients routinely hear these statements from you, saying them will become a part of the culture of the milieu.
- It demonstrates that you respect and care about the child. Hearing these statements from you will send a message of concern for the child and his welfare, making him feel nurtured in an appropriate and respectful manner.

So, remember to demonstrate good manners and to take responsibility for your actions. It will go a long way toward helping your clients internalized these positive values and responses within themselves.

Figure out the currency of the child.

What’s the individual currency of each child—that is, what uniquely motivates each of your clients? If you can figure this out, you’ll be several steps ahead in the game.

Not every reward or consequence means the same thing to each child. One kid may cherish extra video game time, while another may simply desire extra time with their favorite staff person. Instead of trying to fit each client into the same box, figure out what uniquely motivates each one—both rewards and consequences—and use those motivations to encourage compliant behavior.

Know when to disengage.

There are times for engaging a child and there are times to disengage. When you're trying to enforce a consequence or an activity, such as a quiet time out or bedtime, it's time to disengage and not entertain the child. For, if you feed into the child's appeals for attention, you're only reinforcing their impulse to avoid the consequence or activity and encouraging them to continue misbehaving.

No matter how many times the child attempts to ask you a question or delay their responsibility, you must tell them once, or twice at most, that you can't speak with them now and that they must serve their consequence or wait until the end of the activity or another time before you can talk with them. Then, disengage and use planned ignoring, only chiming in occasionally to remind the child of the consequences for not following through with their responsibility.

Communication is key.

Oftentimes children will act out because they don't know how to communicate effectively. Whining and temper tantrums can manifest when a child does not know how to appropriately communicate his or her needs. Part of your job is to try to teach your clients effective and appropriate communication skills.

Here are some things you can do to teach proper communication skills:

- Communicate appropriately with your coworkers and model good communication skills.
- Communicate appropriately with your clients: use "please" and "thank you" when addressing them, and use feeling words and be honest, telling your clients how their behavior makes you feel. For example: "Your behavior has made me feel frustrated."

- Encourage your clients to use “I feel statements” to express their feelings appropriately to others (and use them yourself). “I feel statements” will empower your clients to express themselves in positive ways that are assertive yet nonthreatening.

The structure of an “I feel statement” goes like this: “I feel _____ when you _____. What I need from you is to (or not to) _____. In return, I will _____.”

For example: “I feel *mad* when you *take my toys without asking*. What I need from you is to *ask before playing with my toys and to respect my decision when I say no*. In return, I will *let you play with my toys when I feel like sharing them*.”

Whose needs come first?

One common problem among new and experienced staff alike is putting their own needs above those of their clients. To be a successful child advocate, you must put your clients’ needs first. If you don’t, your clients will pick up on your self-serving mindset and will resent you or take advantage of you for it.

So always be vigilant about knowing whose needs you are trying to meet—whether they’re your own or your clients’. Here are some ways in which a staff person may consciously or unconsciously put his or her needs first:

- Attempting to get one’s own need for unconditional acceptance from the children met at all costs. This attitude results in the staff person frequently ignoring the rules and limits, thereby *enabling* dysfunctional behaviors and values in the clients. Those staff who aim primarily for acceptance will only end up disappointed as the clients take advantage of them. Consistently enforcing boundaries and rules, on the other hand, will often initially elicit expressions of animosity from the clients, but in the long run they will respect and *genuinely* bond with the staff who use that approach.

- Attempting to get one's own need to express one's feelings of compassion met at all costs. Sometimes love has to be tough and not nurturing, and when firmness is called for but coddling is provided, it only reinforces negative behaviors and values. Conversely, firm love teaches respect for the rules and for others. Nurturing should be provided as a reward only when the rules are being followed, thereby reinforcing compliance and positive values.
- Ignoring the clients because one is lazy or unconcerned with their needs. Besides abuse in its various forms, neglect is probably the next most unforgivable offense a staff can commit. Do not be a neglectful staff!

What would Spiderman do?

If a child really looks up to a certain good and respectable person—real or fictional—leverage that admiration. The header to this tip—“What would Spiderman do?”—is, in fact, a question a coworker actually effectively used to motivate a child to stop his aggressive outbursts. This coworker discovered the currency of the child by exploiting the child's obsession with everything Spiderman. When faced with this question, the child would stop in his tracks, reflect for a moment, and respond, “I guess he would do the right thing.” The client would then cease his aggression.

Be careful, however, to use an intervention like this sparsely; for, if you overuse it, it will soon lose its effectiveness when the child catches on to your game. Indeed, WWSD?

“Okay, now you owe me back the time you've wasted.”

If your facility utilizes a room or area where clients can go to serve time outs or to “cool off,” you may want to try this intervention—if you've got the time and

patience for it, and your employer allows it. Keep track of how long it takes for the client to finally calm down and comply with your request to sit quietly and serve the time out. Then tell the client that because it took him X minutes to finally become compliant, he has wasted that much of your time and will have to pay it back to you by sitting quietly for that much longer. (You can also tell the child of this plan before he serves the time out.) The child will likely protest or act out at this news, but if you calmly respond, “Okay, now you’re wasting more of my time and will have to pay back this time too,” he should begrudgingly calm down before too long.

It could be a bit of a struggle the first time you try this intervention, but if you hold your ground, chances are the child will avoid earning time outs from you in the future. Note, though, that this intervention doesn’t work with all clients; in fact, time outs themselves are ineffective if your employer’s policies make it prohibitive to actually enforce them when clients refuse to serve them.

Natural and logical consequences are often the best ways to modify behavior.

What happens when a child touches something hot and burns her hand? She learns not to touch that thing again, right?

Sometimes a client just has to experience the natural consequences of a behavior before she learns not to display that behavior any longer. A natural consequence would be something like losing a toy she left out at night in spite of being reminded to put it away before going to bed.

A logical consequence, on the other hand, is something *logically* related to the behavior. A logical consequence could be something like requiring the client to use some of her money or tokens—whatever the program currency is—to buy back the item she left out, which ended up in the “lost and found” bin. Most

likely, this client would learn more from these natural and logical consequences than from your constant reminders and reprimands.

 **Fake it until you make it.**

Are you not assertive and tough-skinned by nature? Well, you had better learn to be. Sorry to burst your bubble, but if you don't possess those qualities, you may not last long in this line of work.

But don't despair if you're a passive and shy person: you can overcome those disadvantages at work. For, many of us direct-care veterans began as passive individuals when we started. We hung in there, and we learned how to project a tough, assertive façade, even if we remained shy and passive outside our place of employment. We simply faked an assertive demeanor until that assertiveness became a natural part of the persona we took on at work. Off the job we remained our reserved and quiet old selves; but on the job we became tough and assertive dudes.

Tips and Tricks for Working with Children in Residential Treatment Care

Quick Reference Guide

*** (Remove these pages and keep them in your pocket for quick and easy reference.) ***

- ☞ **Safety is your number one priority**—Always be vigilant about keeping your clients safe. Without safety, nothing else matters.
- ☞ **Always start out firm when first meeting and getting to know a client**—Be calm, assertive, consistent, and fair—and follow through with consequences and rewards.
- ☞ **Let out your nurturing side only after establishing yourself as a firm yet fair adult**—Reveal your nurturing side only after a child knows you are serious and clearly respects you.
- ☞ **Be consistent. Always**—Consistently enforce the rules and the structure as they are; do not amend them to appease the demands of any one child.
- ☞ **The kids will get away with what you let them get away with**—If you enforce the rules and limits consistently and resolutely, almost without exception your clients will become compliant.
- ☞ **Focus on the qualities you want, not just the ones you don't**—Spend ample time focusing on the good behaviors and the ones you'd like to see, and you'll see an increase in those behaviors.
- ☞ **Be proactive and nip problems in the bud**—Be proactive and meet the needs of your clients immediately—for ignored needs can escalate into significant problems.
- ☞ **Redirection is a brilliant proactive measure**—Divert a child's attention from their present (inappropriate or escalating) behavior into a totally different (appropriate) behavior or activity.
- ☞ **Hurdle help helps to avoid outbursts of frustration**—Offer hurdle help to assist a client with getting past an obstacle. Just say, "Come on, I'll help you. Together we'll get this thing done."
- ☞ **Avoid power struggles as much as possible—but if you find yourself in one, win at all costs**—Never, ever let a client overpower or outlast you in a power struggle.
- ☞ **Be neutral to keep your edge**—When correcting a child's behavior, maintain a neutral facial expression and tone. By being neutral, you will not reinforce the undesired behavior or attitude.
- ☞ **Just planned ignore 'em**—By not feeding the child's negative behavior with attention, the child soon loses interest in displaying that particular behavior.
- ☞ **Offer great praise when a client complies with your direction or otherwise displays positive behavior**—It reinforces your clients' positive behaviors with responses that make them feel good.
- ☞ **Never undermine your coworkers**—Never override a coworker's decision regarding a client without first consulting with that coworker, or you will undermine your coworker.
- ☞ **Always back up your coworkers in front of the clients**—Never disagree with a coworker in front of a client—he will only exploit this division or learn poor conflict resolution skills from it.

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- ☞ **Never start a battle with a child you can't finish**—Never do or say something to set a client off and then leave your coworkers to clean up the mess, unless you want to make enemies.
- ☞ **If a child asks you a question and you don't know the answer, then the answer is "No"**—Do not hesitate or waver in your response. Be assertive and swift with your response.
- ☞ **Always be professional**—Remember that these kids are watching and learning from everything you do. If you want the kids to respect you, you must conduct yourself as an adult.
- ☞ **Control the environment to control behavior**—Look around the environment and see what unintentional traps are set that can contribute to unnecessary problems, and then resolve them.
- ☞ **Give them choices or find a suitable middle ground**—Offer a choice between something undesirable (a consequence) and something acceptable (a compliant behavior).
- ☞ **Uncover the root cause of a behavior**—Try to always understand the root cause of a behavior, and then address it appropriately.
- ☞ **Do not make empty threats**—Don't threaten a consequence you cannot actually enforce.
- ☞ **Say what you mean, and mean what you say**—Always follow through with your stated consequence or promised rewards.
- ☞ **Bribes do not work**—Instead, create a plan to provide a reward only when the client exhibits the compliant behavior on her own or on the first time she is given a direction.
- ☞ **Don't try to be their friend, because the truth is you can't be**—When these children fail to see you in the role of an adult in charge, they won't feel secure with or respect you.
- ☞ **Please use "please" when giving directions, and then wait five seconds for compliance**—Also provide only one direction at a time rather than compound directions.
- ☞ **Be able to say "thank you," "I'm sorry, and "it was my fault"**—Being able to say these phrases models appropriate behavior and demonstrates that you respect and care about the kids.
- ☞ **Figure out the currency of the child**—Figure out what uniquely motivates each child—both rewards and consequences—and use those motivations to encourage compliant behavior.
- ☞ **Know when to disengage**—Refrain from entertaining a child seeking negative attention. Feeding into her appeals for attention only encourages her to continue inappropriate behaviors.
- ☞ **Communication is key**—A child may act out because he doesn't know how to communicate effectively. Try to teach your clients effective and appropriate communication skills.
- ☞ **Whose needs come first?**—To be a successful child advocate, you must put your clients' needs first. If you put your needs first, your clients will resent you or take advantage of you for it.
- ☞ **What would Spiderman do?**—If a child really looks up to a certain good and respectable person—real or fictional—leverage that admiration.
- ☞ **"Okay, now you owe me back the time you've wasted"**—Keep track of how long it takes for a client to calm down and comply with your request. Then, add it to the time he was to serve.
- ☞ **Natural and logical consequences are often the best ways to modify behavior**—Most kids will learn better from natural and logical consequences than from reminders and reprimands.
- ☞ **Fake it until you make it**—If you can project a tough, assertive façade, you'll do well. Simply fake an assertive demeanor until that assertiveness becomes a natural part of your work persona.