SELF-STUDY COURSE

Handling Stress and Anger in Foster Parenting

October 1998

4.0 Hours Training Credit

This self-study course was adapted from the training curriculum Stress and Anger in Foster Care used by the Alaska Center for Resource Families. The following sources were also used in revising this self-study:

**Burnout Protection: A Foster Care Survival Handbook**, by Susan Meltsner, American Foster Care Resources, 1984

**The Cycle of Anger** Mary Jane Admudson and Barbara Naki, Institute for Family Enrichment in Pearl City, Hawaii

**Notes to Staff: On Managing the Angry Client** Charles Confer, America Foster Care Resources, Inc. 1989.


**Stress Management** Daly Positive Personal Development, 1998

**The Stress of Life**, Dr Hans Welye, 1978

**What Everyone Should Know About Stress** Scriptograph Book, Channing L. Bete, 1975

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**FOSTER PARENT COMPETENCIES**

*Handling Stress and Anger in Foster Parenting*

*Self-Study Course (4.0 Hours)*

This Self-Study module addresses part or all of the following Child Welfare League of America Competencies for Foster Caregivers:

904-1 The foster caregiver knows some of the challenges, stresses, and rewards typically experienced by foster families.

933-1 The foster caregiver can plan, organize, and manage family life and activities in a way that makes the best use of time and resources.

933-2 The foster caregiver understands the dynamics of stress, can recognize the signs of stress in him/her and his/her family, and can use constructive coping skills and time management strategies to reduce stress and prevent burnout.

916-6 The foster caregiver can recognize signs of family stress, understand the effects of stress on family members’ behavior, knows and can use effective coping strategies, and can support systems to help manage stress and prevent family crisis.
HANDLING STRESS AND ANGER IN FOSTER PARENTING
Part One: What Is Stress And What Is Burnout?

As a foster parent, you already know what stress is. It is when you need to have your child at a counseling appointment at the same time you scheduled a dentist appointment for yourself. It is when you can’t get a hold of your social worker while a birth parent is demanding a visit with her child outside of the regular schedule. It is caring for a constantly crying baby who can’t sleep for longer than two hours at a time.

Sound familiar? But why stress does happen? And what can you do about it? That’s what this self-study will explore. To make the best use of this course, read through the materials and do all the exercises. No one needs to see your responses except yourself. For training credit, follow the instructions to complete the Check Your Understanding Questionnaire and return it to the Alaska Center for Resource Families for credit.

Ready? Let’s go!

What Is Stress And What Causes It?
People often consider stress as something negative, as in “I’m under a lot of stress.” The fact is, that stress is neither bad nor good. Stress is an organism’s response to events, conditions or agents in one’s life. These conditions, events, or agents (referred to as stressors) can be internal or environmental, real or imagined. They are considered stressors because they require the organism to respond or adapt in some way. These stressors can be good, bad or neutral. For example, getting married is a very stressful event—but most of us would consider that a good thing. Illness, or too much work is stressful. Moving is stressful. Being late is stressful. Stress is a normal part of everyday living. Too little stress can be as damaging as too much stress. Stress helps us survive. If you didn’t feel some stress when a person steps in front of your car, you wouldn’t have the quickened reaction time to step on the brake. If a baby cries because he is hungry, and you did not feel any anxiety, you wouldn’t feel compelled to feed the baby.

Stress is a physical response in our body. How your body responds has nothing to do with the nature of the stressor. Rapid heartbeats, sweaty palms and dry mouth are physical stress symptoms that occur whether you are concerned about a child, interviewing for a job, or narrowly escaping a head-on collision. When we face a stressful situation, we tend to respond in two ways. This is called the “flight or fight” response. For example, we might choose to remove ourselves or avoid stressful situations (such as not answering the telephone, avoiding someone or leaving a room) or we may stay and fight the stress (such as confronting someone, not leaving and taking the abuse). Sometimes we can’t leave (such as if we have a boss who is yelling at us or a child who is driving us nuts) so we stay and sit through the stress. Sometimes we just stuff our feelings inside us. Foster care is filled with stresses. In the next exercise, some of these stresses are listed. Which have you faced?
EXERCISE: What Stresses Are In Foster Care?
For the following list, mark an “X” beside the item if you have experienced any of the following situations.

___ Getting a new foster child.
___ Injury of foster child.
___ Change of social worker.
___ Meeting birth parent for first time.
___ Court hearing.
___ Foster child is in trouble at school.
___ Foster child using alcohol/drugs.
___ Birth parent doesn’t show for visit.
___ Foster child runs away.
___ Birth child fighting with foster child.
___ Foster child acting out sexually.
___ Foster child gets pregnant.
___ Illness in the household.
___ Conference with foster child’s teacher.
___ Foster child stealing from family members.
___ Social worker not returning phone call.
___ Medical emergency or illness in foster child.
___ Disciplining foster child.
___ Requesting a foster child be removed.
___ Foster child causes injury to a family pet.
___ Acting-out behaviors after visits.
___ Complaint filed against foster parents.
___ Stress in foster parent’s marriage.
___ Need for respite care, but none available.
___ Shopping with foster child for new clothes.
___ Parenting a special needs foster child.
___ Involvement with foster child's counselor.
Stress Can Come From The Inside, Too
Internal thoughts and events can also be stressful. How many times have you found yourself upset or worried just because you were thinking about something that hasn’t happened yet? The next exercise will help you identify these stresses.

EXERCISE: What Are The Internal Factors Cause Me Stress?
For the following list, mark an “X” beside the item if you have experienced any of the following situations.

___ Worried about a sick relative
___ Grieving or missing someone
___ Worried someone might not like you
___ Dreading a visit with a social worker
___ Dreading a visit with a birth parent
___ Not knowing what to do with a child
___ Feeling fear
___ Feeling persecuted
___ Feeling unsupported by your spouse
___ Not sleeping well
___ Not being able to eat or eating too much
___ Drinking more than you should or using too many sedatives
___ Disagreeing strongly with the caseplan for a child
___ Wanting for the results of a complaint investigations
___ Fearing the pain of a dental operation
___ Feeling sick or tired
___ Having internal pain
___ Thinking about what you wished you had said to someone

All of these are things that happen inside of us. They can cause the same signs of stress as events. Thinking can cause your blood pressure to rise, your face to get red, and your fists to clench. Many times, we get stressed just because we don’t know what is going to happen. For example, when you go to the dentist, you may feel fearful because you don’t know if it is going to hurt. When a social worker doesn’t return your phone call, you don’t know if the social worker is ignoring your, avoiding you or didn’t get your message. Internal conditions can cause us lots of stress. Think about what it means when we “take it out on someone.” It means what we are feeling internally has a direct affect on our actions.
EXERCISE: What Are The Signs That I Am Stressed?

Read through the following signs. Check which ones apply to you when you are experiencing a great amount of stress.

- Pounding of the heart
- Urge to cry, run, or hide
- Insomnia
- Being emotionally exhausted
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Pain in neck or lower back
- Increased smoking
- Accident proneness
- Feeling keyed up
- Feeling afraid, but not knowing what we’re afraid of
- Feeling hopeless
- Being tired
- Feeling depressed
- High pitched, nervous laughter
- Sweating
- Feeling worthless
- Headaches
- Loss of or excessive appetite
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Feeling weak or dizzy
- Inability to concentrate
- Nightmares

What Happens when Stress Is Chronic or Not Managed?

When you feel these symptoms, you are probably feeling stress. Stress is normal and to be expected. But stress can also cause problems when it is chronic or when we can’t discharge the heightened physical reactions inside us. Too much stress or stress not handled properly can lead to exhaustion and physical problems. This is why people often get sick after a stressful event in their life. If we don’t manage our stress on a regular basis, then the physical and emotional effects pile up. Burnout is when you reached that point where you are exhausted, ill, disillusioned or less effective than you were before. You become less able to give a positive response and often find it hard to care about things you used to care about.
What Causes Burnout in Foster Care?

Too many demands on energy, strength and resources over a prolonged period of time.

+ High expectations of and deep personal involvement in the work one does.
+ Too few actions taken to replenish the energy consumed in meeting these demands.

__________________________
=BURNOUT!

So, to keep from “burning out”, you’ve got to do the opposite. And that will be the focus of Part Two.

What Prevents Burnout in Foster Care?

Try to limit the demands of unnecessary things in your life

+ Develop realistic expectations
+ Keep yourself physically and emotionally healthy.

__________________________
=A HEALTHY RESPONSE TO STRESS

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TO REVIEW:

1. The things that stress you out can be normal and not so normal events that happen.

2. The things that stress you out can come from within yourself or from events outside yourself.

3. Foster parents face stressful situations everyday.

4. The body and the mind have ways to adapt and deal with stress. But too much stress or unrelenting stress without a healthy response can cause chronic physical and mental problems.

5. Knowing our own signs of stress is the first step in reducing and dealing with it.
HANDLING STRESS AND ANGER IN FOSTER PARENTING

Part Two: What Do I Do About Stress and Burnout?

We can’t get rid of our stress? Stress can turn into burnout? Keep reading! Since stress is inevitable in our lives, we need to look at ways to reduce it and deal with it in a way that it won’t turn to burnout. You may not be able to change the child in your home, or where you live, or who the social worker is. BUT, you CAN do something about stress. Even when you can not change the circumstances around you, you can do things that will help you handle that stress in a more healthy way. This section will look at some simple principles that can begin to help you reduce your stress and handle it better. We will discuss the first three principles in this chapter, and the last one will be developed in the last chapter. These principles are:

Develop Realistic Expectations of Your Foster Child
Develop Realistic Expectations of Yourself
Take Care of Yourself Physically and Emotionally
Learn How to Control Your Anger

If you understand these principle and apply them in your daily life, you won’t get rid of your stress. But you will be able to reduce some of it and be able to manage the rest in a way that will be healthier for you and your family.

STRESS REDUCING PRINCIPLE #1:
Develop Realistic Expectations of Your Foster Child

Maybe you became a foster parent thinking that this would be just like taking care of a friend’s child. But then, it may have been harder and more complicated than you had ever thought it could be. When our expectations are too high, then the child can never fulfill them. He will disappoint us and frustrate us. When we have reasonable expectations, we are more often going to be successful.

Stress Tip #1: Develop realistic expectations by getting good information from your caseworker.

Expecting to receive adequate information and to be informed of matters affecting the child in your care is certainly reasonable. And it makes your job easier. Some workers provide this information automatically and graciously answer any questions you may have. Others do not. If the agency or worker with whom you have contact withholds or neglects to offer pertinent information on a regular basis, your potential to burn out increases. Under the new Alaska child
protection law, workers must share all information pertaining to the child. If you feel a worker is withholding information, you need to contact their supervisor. And feel free to ask questions. A list of questions you should ask are located in the Alaska Foster Parent Handbook. These questions include: why is the child in care? Is there any history of abuse or neglect? Any behavioral problems that are known? Is the child on medication? The answers to these questions will give you a general idea of what is needed for this child and help you develop realistic expectations.

But this doesn’t mean you will know everything about the child when he is placed with you. Sometimes this information is not known or gradually comes out as the case proceeds. While it would help to have this information ahead of time, it is not always possible. Knowing this and accepting this will prevent you from getting mad and frustrated unnecessarily.

**Stress Tip #2:** Develop realistic expectations by knowing good child development.

When information is truly unavailable, foster parents must provide care based on the developmental information they have learned and using their own observations of the child being placed. Knowing the basics of child development helps you prepare for some of the more difficult behaviors that these children show. You develop this knowledge by raising your own children, working with other children, and study on your own. If you know child development, you will have a better understanding of what is a serious problem and when “this too shall pass.” For example, some things you may have wished you knew when you became a parent might include the following:

**BABIES:**

Babies aren’t always sweet and cuddly. Crying is how they get their needs met. Sometimes their crying is inconsolable. Taking care of a baby can be demanding, boring, and repetitious. Children mimic what they see. Nothing is safe within reach-- everything goes in the mouth. Separation anxiety happens around 7 or 8 months and only mom or the primary caregiver will do.

**TODDLERS:**

MINE, MINE, MINE! Tantrums. Incredible curiosity, Is moving and exploring so safety is a big concern. Says “no” even more than you do. May refuse to eat. Biting and hitting are common forms of expression. Understands simple direction/statements.

**PRESCHOOL:**

EARLY GRADESCHOOL:
Everything is a big deal; Shows off center of attention. Serious Sam/Susie; Anxious to please. Impatient/critical; Begins to make jokes (usually not funny to adults) Teachers, peers and friends become important. Often refers to what others say. May still see some bedwetting. “It’s Not Fair!” Very black and white about what’s right and wrong.

LATE GRADE SCHOOL:
Critical of others. “I can do it!” “I KNOW!” Can be both direct and caring and rude and selfish. Lots of different interests. May bounce from one interest to another. Loves school one day - hates the next. Interested in your opinion. Beginning to look toward teens and how they act. More sensitivity to what peers think and do.

ADOLESCENCE:
MOODY. Can be disagreeable. Challenges everything. Very sensitive about looks. Peers become more important than adults—BUT THEY STILL NEED ADULTS. Changing bodies. Experimenting with social relationships. Trying on new personalities and values—often reject parent’s values. Time of potential experimentation with drugs, smoking, sex and pushing authority. Girls spend a lot of time on the phone; boys spend lot of time alone in their rooms.

Knowing basic child development for the age you are caring for will help you adjust your expectations and help your home be less stressful. Additionally, it is important to be a parent. Children who have too much power in a household and who can bully their way into getting what they want can result in a very chaotic, stressful home where the child, not the parent is in control. Working on good parenting skills is essential for the foster parent to help reduce stress.

Stress Tip #3: Develop realistic expectations and skills by learning about your child’s condition.
The children in our care often have experienced things or have special conditions that affect their behavior and needs. Learn everything you can about the child’s condition. This will help you more effective and see more success—thus lowering your stress. You will always be challenged and stressed by children with difficult behaviors. Improving your skills will help your stress.

Example: A parent of a ten-year-old child with Fetal Alcohol Effects was frustrated in her attempts to get him to clean his room. It turned into a battle every Saturday. He would know what to do, but wouldn’t do it. The mother soon figured out because of his fetal alcohol effects, he would not be able to translate into action what he heard. The foster mother learned from another parent to take pictures of the child doing the cleaning and posting him on his wall. He then had a visual reminder of what he supposed to do and the arguments lessened.
**Example:** A foster family caring for a cocaine affected baby got information on what to expect before a baby was placed with them. They learned about swaddling the baby, keeping the room dark, avoiding quick movements and holding her lips to help her suck her bottle. The baby still cried hard for hours at a time, and they often felt worn out by the crying. But the foster parents knew that it was the result of the cocaine and not because of anything they were or weren’t doing.

Many of the larger communities in Alaska have parent support groups or parent resource centers that can help get information or training. Or contact the Alaska Center for Resource Families for more information at 1-800-478-7307.

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### EXERCISE: What Do Your Kids Do?

Write a list of two things foster child does that really irritates you in the first column. Then think what you expect of them and what developmental stage they are at. In the last column, ask yourself if your expectations are realistic. Sometimes we need to adjust our expectations. Sometimes expectations are very realistic and we have to look at other way to handle a situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>What I Want Them To Do</th>
<th>Developmental Stage Or Special Needs Of My Child</th>
<th>Are my expectations realistic?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My teenage foster daughter got suspended for smoking at school.</td>
<td>1. I expect her not to smoke because it is not good for her. I expect her to be able to stay in school.</td>
<td>1. Adolescents often show patterns of defiance. The girl smoked before she came to our home</td>
<td>1. It may not be realistic to expect her not to smoke. But it is realistic to expect her to do things that will not get her suspended from school or to accept the consequence of her actions.</td>
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Stress Tip #4: *Set up your home so that children can experience success (and that you will too!)*

How you structure your home and daily life can help you reduce stress. House rules, structure, routines, clearly defined expectations and consistent behavior management are all things that help your house be less stressful. A feeling of chaos and “free for all” can be very stressful for people. If you have a sensitive child, give yourself more time to make transitions. Give warnings about what is coming up. Do your shopping with him at a time when he is not hungry or tired and more likely to blow. Reduce the noise in your home.

* STRESS REDUCING PRINCIPLE #2: 
*Develop Realistic Expectations Of Yourself*

Stress Tip #5: *Understand that there is rarely a simple solution.*

Even assuming that the majority of problems HAVE solutions, expecting them to be clear-cut, simple and easy to find is a belief that meets with harsh reality quickly. There can hardly be simple solutions in foster care when most problems often involve several people. Family and behavioral problems take years to make, and will take time to work out.

Stress Tip #6: *Don’t expect to change a child, save a child or perform a miracle.*

You may expect that your presence in a child’s life will make a world of difference and that the solution to all the child’s problems will lie within the realm of your capabilities. As a foster parent, you WILL make a difference in a child’s life. It will simply be far less dramatic and far reaching than you may have imagined. You may even mistakenly think you as having made no difference at all. No matter how capable you are, there will be problems that you will not be capable of handling, especially if you insist on handling the problem alone. Children bring with them into foster care problems that defy solutions and that will push you to your limit and beyond. If you want to reduce your stress, do the best you can and accept that you can’t do everything. *Don’t expect success with every child.* There are just some children (and people) you won’t make a connection with. That’s the way life goes.

Stress Tip #7: *Celebrate the small steps.*

“Impatience, is an occupational hazard in the helping profession.” Let’s face it, the going is painfully slow. The setbacks are frequent. Weekly visitations alone will often result in a placement that is one step forward and two steps back all the way down the line. It probably took years to create the problems you are facing and could take twice as many to correct. When you accept small changes and celebrate the small successes, you also make it less stressful for the child, who can feel when you are pushing him or not accepting him.
Stress Tip #8: Build your skills by learning all you can.
Many times, a child will come into your home that will totally puzzle you or defy everything you do. Or you may have a child with a difficult condition such as conduct disorder and fetal alcohol effects. Learning more about that condition will help you be more effective and less stressed. Read a lot, talk to other foster parents and service providers, take classes, contact the Alaska Center for Resource Families for information and take as many workshops as you can.

* STRESS REDUCING PRINCIPLE #3:
Take Care of Yourself Emotionally and Physically

Research shows us that when we don't eat properly and don't do some things for ourselves that we enjoy, our bodies react differently. When nutrition is balanced and we do things we enjoy or give us pleasure, we feel better! When we don't meet our own needs, we are unable to function appropriately. Since we can't get rid of all the stress in our lives, we have to develop the physical and emotional ability to take good care of ourselves so that stress does not make us sick or cause us to hurt others.

Simple, isn't it? We tell our kids this stuff all the time. But parents often put their kids ahead of their own needs, and may not do the things that will keep we know will keep us healthy. If we never put gas in the car, or in the snowmachine, it’s going to stop running. So make sure you remember to tune up your own “machine.”

Eat well. Limit sugar. Drinks lots of water. Exercise regularly. Play with your kids. Take a walk. Get a jump rope and jump in the house for 5 minutes. Go biking with your children. Take an aerobic class. Go fishing or hunting or berry picking. Move and stretch everyday. Take a walk at lunchtime -- get out of the office or house. Limit your intake of caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, etc.)

Stress Tip #10: Learn to relax. Remember to breathe. Take control of your time.
Regular relaxation is the number one way to combat stress that you cannot get rid of in your life. If you can learn to relax yourself on a regular basis, you can physically re-charge and counteract some of the negative effects of stress. How do you relax?
Take a break and close your eyes for five minutes. Listen to relaxing music or a relaxation tape. Practice yoga or relaxation techniques. Breathe! This is the simplest way to relax. Concentrate on breathing in and out for a few minutes, and let everything else leave your mind. You can even do this while you are standing in line. Take a nap when your child does. Close your eyes and think of a restful relaxing place. Imagine yourself there. Pray or meditate. Learn to make lists. Writing down a daily list of priorities helps you avoid too many deadlines. At the end of the day you can see your accomplishments.

**Stress Tip #11: Cultivate a positive attitude in life.**

If you can’t change your situation, change your attitude. Develop a positive outlook on life. Focus on positive things—surround yourself with positive affirmations, with positive people. Think of working together, not fighting against. Look for the beauty in the world around you. Accept that the world is not perfect, but that’s okay. Use affirmations to help you develop a positive attitude. Affirmations are positive statements that you repeat to yourself often to help you keep on track. These might include:

- I’m doing the best I can.
- I’m taking care of my family.
- I have a gift to give, no matter how small.
- One day at a time. Nice and easy.
- I have control over my life.
- I can choose how I’m going to respond.

Or read from a book of affirmation or inspirational quotes. Remember to laugh and smile. These are proven stress reducers. Tell stories, listen to jokes. Laugh with your children. Laugh at yourself. Read the cartoons. All of these will help you stay on the lighter side of life.

**Stress Tip #12: Find the support of others. Talk about your feelings.**

When you are stressed, one of the best ways to relieve your stress is to find others to share it with. Develop a personal support system of friends, family, church and community that can share the load. Sharing with other foster parents can be extremely helpful in sharing ideas and feeling that you are not alone. Talk to your caseworker about respite care. Participating in a spiritual or faith community can also be tremendous help to providing support. Talking, prayer, cultural activities and customs, and rituals are all ways to draw support from the people around us.

**Stress Tip #13: Let go of destructive habits.**

Do you obsess on situations when people have wronged you? Do you find yourself turning to a drink, or a piece of fudge, or a sleeping pill when you are feeling stressed out, to help you relax. Are there people you really hate and hold grudges against? Do you find yourself thinking everyone but yourself is incompetent? Want to reduce the stress in your life? LET GO! Let go of these destructive habits and thoughts. “Stinking thinking” is a destructive habit and so are physical habits that hurt you.
People who are experiencing burnout or high stress levels tend to increase their alcohol consumption, use more medication and change their eating habits, usually overeating or bingeing on high calorie/low nutritious foods. Alcohol, tranquilizers and sleeping pills all have depressant qualities. Not only do they have the potential for creating yet another area of our lives that is out of control, they tend to keep us down, lethargic and unhappy. So, let go of the things that harm you. Don’t let them have power over you anymore.

EXERCISE: **Inventory of How I take Care Of Myself**

Answer the following questions to determine how well you take care of yourself.

*One way I like to relax is....*

*One way I keep a positive attitude is...*

*Do I get enough sleep?*

*Do I have any destructive ways I deal with stress?*

*In the past two days, I have gotten what kinds of physical exercise:*

*In the last two days, what did I eat or put in my mouth? Can I do better?*

*Who do I consider as my support system outside of the family? When was the last time I used them?*

*When is the last time I had a good belly laugh? Or make someone else laugh?*
HANDLING STRESS AND ANGER IN FOSTER PARENTING
Part Three: Anger: Let’s Talk About It

Anger is a powerful emotion that can result either is change or damage. Foster parents are quite familiar with anger, both in themselves and in the children they care for. We will begin this section on anger by looking at some of our own feelings towards anger.

EXERCISE: How Do I Get Angry?

1. When you were growing up, were you allowed to get angry? What happened when you got angry?

2. What do you do when you get angry now?

3. What does your foster child do when he/she gets angry?

4. Do you ever regret the way you handle your anger?
Understanding the Cycle of Anger
Anger is a healthy emotion. It is what we do with anger that often gets us in trouble. In other words, it is our behavior not our feelings, that tend to cause problems. We can learn to separate feelings from behaviors. We can be angry without hurting others or ourselves. We can also teach our foster children to do the same.

Anger does not appear out of no-where. It builds. Think of anger as a pattern that builds and subsides. If we understand why anger builds, we can take more control over what we do when we get angry. The Cycle of Anger allows us to look at the origins of anger and how it escalates unless there is some other break in the cycle. This graph may look complicated at first, but read the explanation given and refer back to the Cycle of Anger.

THE CYCLE OF ANGER

1. UNMET EXPECTATIONS
   Things I look forward to and count on, but they don’t happen.
   UNCOMMUNICATED EXPECTATIONS
   Things I want to have happen but I don’t tell anyone.

2. PRIMARY FEELINGS
   When that happened, I felt...

3. SECONDARY FEELING
   Anger

4. JUSTIFICATION
   I have a right to feel this way because...

5. FEELINGS ESCALATE
   When I really get mad, I feel...(Physical reactions)

6. EXPRESSION OF FEELING
   DESTRUCTIVE
   CONSTRUCTIVE

7. RESOLUTION
   Can we talk about it?

GRAPH: The Cycle of Anger
Developed by the Institute for Family Enrichment in Pearl City, Hawaii
1. Anger is usually set in motion because of **UNMET EXPECTATIONS** or **UNCOMMUNICATED EXPECTATIONS**. Either things I looked forward to didn’t happen, or no one told me what to expect. Or I may have had an expectation that I failed to communicate and what I wanted to happen, didn’t. For example, “I expect my foster child to treat me with respect. I expect him to help me out with chores around the house.” Or “I expect when I call my social worker, she’s going to get back to me quickly.”

When my expectations are not met, then...

2. I feel disappointed, frustrated, upset, scared, unloved. There is some **PRIMARY FEELING** that I feel as a result. There is always another emotion behind our anger.

Those feelings lead to...

3. **ANGER**. Anger is a secondary emotion. Almost always you can look behind your feeling of anger and find another important feeling. But often our feelings of being hurt, or upset or feeling unloved get transferred into feelings of anger.

Now that I am angry, I feel a need to...

4. **JUSTIFY** my anger. I think of reasons why I should be angry and recall all the other times I was angry about the same situation (or feeling), in other words, I throw in “the kitchen sink”. For example: “This kid never helps me out, he’s lazy. You think for all I do for him, the least he could do is show some respect.” Or “That social worker never returns my call. I think she’s avoiding me.”

What also happens is that...

5. **FEELINGS ESCALATE**. I start to feel physical feelings -- hot, flushed, cry, tight throat, sweaty, pounding heart...). There is an identifiable physical reaction with anger, including adrenaline and increased heart beat.

At this point, there needs to be...

6. **AN EXPRESSION OF FEELING**

What do you do when you are angry? Anger can be expressed in lots of different ways.

**CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH ANGER:**
- Use my words to tell the person what I’m feeling.
- Take a break and think about what is happening.
- Do something physical to work off my feelings like chop wood, go for a walk, clean house, go outside and get some fresh air, cry.
- Talk to someone, say a prayer
- Write a letter/note

**DESTRUCTIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH ANGER**
Yell at someone
Call someone a name to get him mad, too
Hit, kick, and bite
Drive a vehicle recklessly
Drink alcohol
Break something
Throw something
Stuff my anger inside and stew about it
Be passive aggressive or try to get revenge

7. **RESOLUTION** of our anger may or may not happen. If we want to deal with anger constructively, we should not let our anger hang on and continue to hurt us. You know that old saying, “Don’t go to bed mad?” These are wise words! Resolution can occur through talking with the other party. Apologies are made, hugs are often exchanged, and thought is given as to how the anger might be dealt with another time. Are our expectations unrealistic? Do we need to be clearer in what we expect?

If resolution does not occur, anger is “backpacked” around. Ever known someone with a chip on his shoulder that is mad at the world? That’s what happens when you don’t deal with your anger. Sometimes we direct our anger at others (through namecalling, hitting and being sarcastic), and sometimes we direct it at ourselves (by drinking, hurting ourselves and overeating.) We often see kids who carry around their anger at their parents and at the system. When we hold onto our anger like that, it gets in the way of other relationships.

**Rules For Handling Our Anger Constructively**

What’s a good way to handle your anger? It’s different for everyone depending on your personality, the rules of your culture and the circumstances. Keep **The Cycle of Anger** in mind when you examine how you respond when angry. But most people will agree that there are ways you should not deal with your anger. The rules for constructive anger include:

- You may not hurt yourself!
- You may not hurt anyone else!
- You may not hurt anything of value to anyone else!

These rules are important for our foster children to know too.
EXERCISE: What Is My Cycle Of Anger?

Write down the way that you express your anger. Be honest!

Does your list contain any actions that hurt yourself, others or property? Are there more constructive ways you can deal with anger?

How would you like to be able to handle your anger? What could be your first step?

Do I have any unresolved anger or grudges that sometimes get in the way of a healthy relationship with someone?

Anger and Your Foster Child

Think of the foster children who have been in your home. How did they get angry? There are many different answers to this question. Foster children may become angry because they’re scared/fearful about abuse/neglect or about being in foster care. They are lonely/insecure and want to blame someone. They feel out of control and just want to go home. Remember the Cycle of Anger? Behind our feelings of anger is a more basic feeling. These primary feelings are often expressed in angry ways. There is nothing wrong with anger -- remember it is just another emotion. But as for adults and children, it is what we do with our anger that is sometimes not okay.

Often times, foster children have poor role models for expressing their anger. Television and movies are filled with violent scenes and without supervision, children may be constantly exposed. Many children in care come from violent, anger-filled homes so their model is one of rage and fury. It’s sometimes hard for adults to express the emotion/feeling first. We usually model ANGER -- probably because it’s hard to say, “I’m scared, lonely, tired, etc.”

Children often rely upon anger as a means to:
a) Get attention.

b) As an excuse for their unwillingness or inability to do something more effective.

c) As a way to feel more powerful or in control.

Some children have special mental and health needs that predispose them to being angry. Children who have emotional disorders or poor impulse control or show extremely sensitive often tend to show more angry or disruptive behaviors.

To help kids with anger we need to:

- Validate the anger. “It’s okay to be angry.”

- Set a limit. “But it’s not okay to hit (etc.). It is okay to...”

- Talk with the child about the situation, not a lecture or “talking to” but sharing feelings.

- Label the feelings you see present in the angry child.

- Set up a plan for how the child could deal with their anger in a constructive way.

As a foster parent, you also need to know how to defuse a child’s anger and negotiate a positive solution. Defusing anger means to use your skills so that anger does not escalate into an uncontrollable or destructive situation.

**Defusing Another Person’s Anger**

(The following information on negotiation and defusing anger have been adapted from Notes to Staff: On Managing the Angry Client, Charles E. Confer, AFCR, Inc. 1989)

There are four tools you can use to help defuse another person’s anger.

1. **Listen:** Really try to hear what the other person has to say. Don’t say much at all. By not saying much, the child won’t have ammunition to fire back at you! Listen and actually hear what they are peeved or complaining about. Remember, the anger may be their way of getting your attention, so give them your attention!

2. **Apologize:** Have you ever noticed what happens when you are angry and the other person honestly says, “Gee, I’m sorry you’re so upset!” This is not an apology for doing your job or for setting limits, but an apology that the other person is experiencing distresses and hurt. Having someone acknowledge his feelings provide an opportunity for the angry person to “cool down” and realize that he’s been heard.
3. **Agree**: If an apology isn’t appropriate or if it doesn’t work, agree with the angry person. Agreeing can be one of the most successful skills in helping an angry person to cool down. In most situations, regardless of what the angry person (whether child or adult) says, there is at least a small percentage of truth with which you can agree. If you listen, identify that small percentage even 2%, of the truth and agree with that!

**EXAMPLE:**
Last week Matt came home from school spouting off about the teachers. “That stupid school! They don't teach us anything useful for our lives...just a bunch of names and dates. What do I care about what happened in England in 1215? And you know, those teachers sit up there in their stupid faculty lounge and talk about us. I know they talk about us. That’s not fair.”

Can you identify anything that you can agree with that Matt said?

1. “Yes, they teach a lot of facts in school.”
2. “Yes, what happened in England in 1215 doesn’t affect you directly today.”
3. “Yes, teachers do talk about kids in the faculty lounges.”

Agree with Matt -- no need to offer any advice, or feed into his anger, just keep cool and agree with the percentage of truth that could be found. After a moment, Matt is likely to cool down.

4. **Invite Criticism**: Ask the angry person (who should be on the way to cooling down now) to criticize the situation. Ask questions like “What am I doing that upset you?” or “How would you like things to be?”

If this opens up more talk, listen for a while, and try to really understand what is making the person so angry. You don’t have to agree with everything they say, but it is a good tool to get kids talking about their feelings instead of acting them out.

**NOTE TO FOSTER PARENTS WITH AN ANGRY, AGGRESSIVE CHILD**: Ideas for caring for a child who tends to be aggressive and destructive can be found in the self-study *Caring For the Aggressive Child in Foster Care*, available through the Alaska Center for Resource Families lending library.