

NEEDS, EXPRESSION OF NEEDS AND MEETING NEEDS

1. Expression of Need: Sexually Acting Out

The child may engage in overly mature behavior* or sexual interaction with other children or with you as the foster or adoptive parent.

Need

Need to feel close and seek affection and attention in safe ways.

Ways to Meet Need

Set limits gently but clearly. For example, “It’s not OK for you to touch the private parts of my body, and I won’t touch yours.” “I can see you want to get my attention; there are other ways to do that.” “I like showing you that I like you by kissing you on the cheek, but it's not OK for you to try and put your tongue in my mouth.”

Provide clear support. Acknowledge the child’s emotions, even if you must help the child change behaviors.

Let the caseworker know; be specific in reporting the child’s behavior.

Provide sex education. The caseworker can provide guidance in arranging to enroll the child in sex education programs in the school or community.

Encourage the child to talk to you if he or she needs to act out sexually.

Encourage the child to engage in activities or games that expend energy.

Use activities that redirect the child’s mind from the sexual focus. The activity can be solitary, or you may want to participate with the child.

Do not overreact. Do not be harsh or punish the child.

Do not ignore or minimize the child’s behavior. Talk explicitly about how the behavior can be unsafe and what behavior would more likely meet the emotional need.

* Some people may call these behaviors “seductive,” “coy” or “flirtatious.” Avoiding the term “seductive” when describing a child helps us to remember these children are not responsible for this overly mature, sexualized behavior.

2. Expression of Need: Compulsive Masturbation

The child may masturbate numerous times a day and may insert objects in himself or herself. The child may make groaning sounds, thrusting motions or seem lost in a trance.

Needs

Need to experience their bodies as capable of giving them pleasure without fear, violence, embarrassment or dirtiness.

Need to learn how to get affection in safe ways.

Need to believe that he or she is lovable, capable and worthwhile.

Ways to Meet Need

Provide clear support, such as talking about how natural it is to want to feel good.

Note how often the sexual behavior occurs.

Remove sexual stimuli (sexy magazines and television shows, dirty jokes) that may increase sexual feelings or confusion.

Teach the child that masturbation is done in private, such as in the bedroom behind a closed door.

Provide the child with privacy.

3. Expression of Need: Self-Mutilation

The child may show signs of self-destructive behavior, such as causing injury to self.

Needs

Need to believe that he or she is lovable, capable and worthwhile.

Need to work through anger and self-hatred about being sexually abused.

Need to connect with birth family, roots and culture.

Ways to Meet Need

Instruct the child to tell you when he or she feels like hurting himself or herself.

Watch the child's body language, listen to tone of voice and then identify the child's likely emotions in words the child can understand.

Provide sex education.

Give lots of support, love and attention.

Encourage child to become involved in activities where he or she can develop friendships.

Provide individual and group therapy for the child. The caseworker can provide guidance in arranging therapy sessions for the child.

Lock up knives, scissors and other harmful items in the home.

4. Expression of Need: Aggressive Behavior

The child may behave aggressively toward others by, for example, picking fistfights with other children.

Needs

Need to express anger in positive ways.

Need to reduce self-hatred and anger about being sexually abused.

Need to express low self-esteem in a constructive way.

Need to connect with birth family, either through direct contact or through indirect contact, such as hearing about his or her birth family or receiving letters and pictures from them.

Ways to Meet Need

Provide clear support for the child's emotions.

Reassure child that he or she is safe in your home.

Discuss birth parents' strengths and needs (instead of their weaknesses) and allow the child to feel anger at birth parents.

Help the child name emotions.

Show empathy. For example, "I know you are in pain; let's find a better way to deal with the pain. Maybe you can hit a pillow, throw a tennis ball against the wall or draw a picture of how you feel."

Model ways to express anger when you are angry. In other words, when you are angry in the presence of the child, demonstrate how to express anger in a non-harmful or non-threatening way, such as by explaining in a measured tone why you feel angry and what could reasonably be done to make you feel less angry.

Provide individual and group therapy for the child.

Teach the child how to express anger directly in words.

Provide rewards for the child's positive behaviors.

Be clear about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Discipline the child. For example, you might place the child on restriction or, if the child is young, you might give the child “time out.” “Time out” is when you instruct a child who is acting out to be still and quiet for a brief time, providing the child with a few moments to collect himself or herself.

Offer choices to the child as much as possible. For example, “You can pick your way of being angry. Hit this pillow, yell in the back hall or get your bat and ball and hit homers.”

