

Defusing Triggers



Suggestions of What to do Before, During, and After You Find Yourself in A Place of Being Triggered by The Actions or Words of Your Adopted Child.

What is a Trigger?

A “trigger” is something that happens when the human body experiences an emotional reaction to the occurrence of something else.

We all have been “triggered” by external events, including the words and actions of another person. The experience resulted in a particular “feeling” because one or more of our needs was not being met. Some “triggers” cause a pleasant response. For example, we smell freshly baked bread, and our mouth starts to water and we can’t wait to taste the food. Other “triggers” cause a reaction that is not what we desire, such as anger when someone cuts us off in traffic.

When we are interacting with our adopted child, a “trigger” can come in the form of his/her action(s) or word(s). These “triggering” actions and statements can range from relatively insignificant items such as the rolling of eyes, sticking out of

a tongue, staring blankly when spoken to, etc., to statements that are truly outrageous, such as a child’s shouting, “I hate you! You are stupid!”, or breaking something.

Our ability to remain calm and in control of our reactions can vary greatly when we are “triggered.” The “fight, flight or freeze” response of our brain reacts immediately. Even the most even-tempered person can struggle to remain calm if she/he gets “triggered” when tired, worried, running late, startled, etc. When “triggers” have been occurring one after the other, patience can finally fly out the window, and be replaced by frustration, aggravation, and the other less-than-optimum feelings that are waiting to overwhelm us. Having the right words to say to ourselves and to our child can make all the difference in these moments.

It can be a huge challenge for a parent to continuously withstand the “triggering” actions and words of their child. When they are facing this onslaught, their breaking point can be reached very easily; therefore, new tools and skills are needed to be learned by the parents to give them the ability to communicate with compassion when “triggered.”

Nonviolent Communication

There is a well-established technique known as NVC (nonviolent communication)* that has been used for over 50 years to de-escalate tensions and facilitate peaceful solutions in some of the world’s highly volatile political situations. It focuses on a four step model of communication:

- (1) OBSERVATION of the words and/or actions of the participants in the interaction;
- (2) Identification of “FEELING” words that reflect the emotional state(s) of the participants;
- (3) Providing empathy and identifying the unmet NEEDS [which is the actual root of the conflict] of the participants; and,
- (4) Making a clear and present-moment REQUEST to meet the needs of the participants, and guiding them to reduce their emotions.

Hundreds of thousands of parents worldwide have found the use of this technique to be very effective in reducing the volatility of interactions with their children.

A key part of the success of using the NVC technique is communicating successfully at the “trigger” point of the conflict.

To get you started, the following is a sampling that you may find helpful when you are “triggered” by the actions and/or words of your adopted child (or anyone else, for that matter):

Phrases to Use When Triggered

“Let me think about that.”

“That’s very interesting. You could be right.”

“I’m curious about [identify what was said or done]. Could you tell me more?”

“I’m struggling with my reaction to [identify what was said or done]. Let me get some clarity on what you are saying.”

“I need to take a breath for a moment.” (You might just say this internally, if needed.)

“Let me see if I got what you’ve said so far.” (Then reflect back what you heard, using as many of the exact words as possible.)

“Let me listen again so I can hear you more fully.”

“When I think about talking with you about this, I feel worried because I really would like it to go well. I wonder if we can talk about this [name a time in the near future].”

Pre-Trigger Practices

Things to do as a preventative practice so you can have more success in responding in a compassionate way when triggered:

- Plan and “over-rehearse” one or two phrases...you can do this silently, in your head... that you can say when you are triggered. (See suggested phrases above).
- If possible, have a brief conversation in advance with your child about which choice he/she would prefer you make when you get triggered, e.g., choosing to walk away; or, staying and communicating about your and your child’s feelings and needs that are alive in that moment until the two of you reach connection.

What To Do When Triggered

Breathe in and out consciously and slowly, until you can respond without reacting.

*Adapted by Becky Walker 2016 (BeyondAdoptions.com) from various resources including: cnvc.org; Bill Stierle — BillStierle.com; Jean Morrison & Christine King — groktheworld.com
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Say one of the phrases that you have rehearsed. (This buys time to assist with remaining in, or getting to a calm, non-reactive state.) NOTE: Be aware that different “triggers” can stimulate different unmet needs; therefore, even if you’ve agreed to a strategy to stay and communicate in triggered moments, but you realize your reaction in a given instance is too severe to find a place of calm quickly; therefore, you may need to default to the last suggested phrase above and agree to have the conversation at a future moment.

As a kind of mantra, silently chant to yourself, “feelings and needs, feeling and needs, feelings and needs” until you can get to a place where you can ask yourself, “What am I feeling and needing in this moment, and what do I think [name of your child] is feeling and needing?”

Utilizing the feelings and needs that you have identified, have an NVC conversation with your child until you get to a place of connection.

Post-Trigger Practices

- Self-care, self-care, self-care.
- If possible, try not to do anything productive in the following hour – just get outside and MOVE.
- Be aware that you might be re-triggered if you try to do something else immediately and it doesn't go your way.

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with Your Adopted
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