Accepting Blame and Responsibility

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Aggression or seeming to 'switch off' and not listening when asked about something she has done.

Denying any involvement:

'You always blame me.'
'It's not fair.'
'It wasn't my fault.'
'I know nothing about it.'

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

Shame – your child may feel personally responsible for what has happened to her in the past; she may have been told that it was her fault or that it was what she wanted.

She may feel that her actions led to her being taken away or to others being punished.

'Bad' behaviour in her early life may have led to unwarranted physical punishment – fear may be driving her inability or refusal to accept blame for her actions.

What can I do?

Supervision will minimize misdemeanours. Adapt the environment to avoid negative behaviours.

Do not ask, *'Why did you do this?'* The child does not know the answer.

If you *know* she is responsible for the incident, then don't ask her, tell her: *'I know you took the money. I understand how difficult it was for you to stop yourself when you saw it.'*

Role play incidents after the event to show other ways of managing.

Practise apologizing when you make a mistake.

TRIGGER

Being reprimanded or expecting to be reprimanded for a misdemeanour. This may occur in situations when you are asking a question such as 'How was your day at school?' Your child might feel that this is an implied criticism, even if this is not your intention.

What can I do?

Pre-empt your child's potential feelings by acknowledging and validating the emotion she may be feeling, for example*: 'I can see this is difficult for you. If I had been hurt the way you were hurt, I'd struggle to say that what happened was my fault.'* Or: *'I wonder if my telling you off makes you feel I don't love you?'*

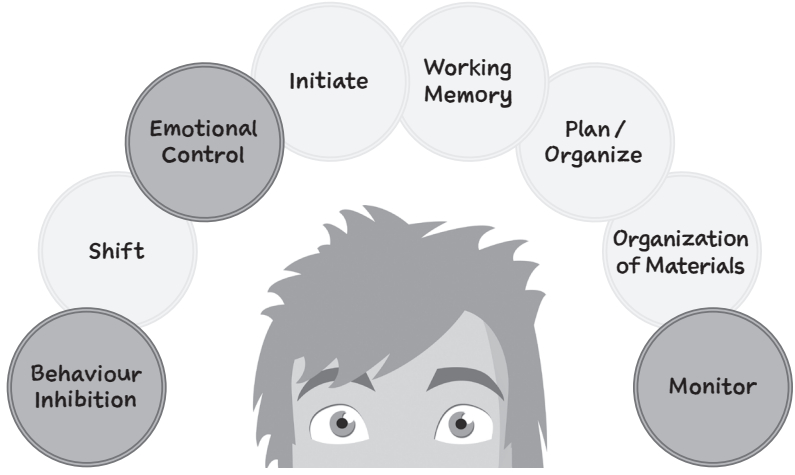
Make consequences appropriate and ensure that they don't accentuate shame or feelings of abandonment.

Draw a line under the incident when the sanction has been implemented.

Your child will not cope with a 'three stikes and you're out' approach; it lacks the structure she needs.

Avoid confrontational situations and do not insist on eye contact.

To reduce shame, limit any reprimand to a ten-second scolding.



FURTHER REFLECTIONS

You may also need to praise small achievements; for example, if she's started to clean the car, you can praise a clean wing mirror rather than waiting for her to complete the full task. If possible use humour: '*Thanks for cleaning the mirror, it allows me to check whether I'm still as beautiful as I was this morning.*'

If you know she struggles to accept responsibility, acknowledge this in advance of addressing the issue: '*I know you'll find it difficult but I need to talk to you about who took the money.*'

Your child needs boundaries and to accept that there are consequences when she has overstepped those boundaries. However, her emotional development is below that expected for her chronological age and she needs the adults in her life to be her 'external regulators', adapting her environment as one would for a toddler so that the possibility of failure is reduced.

You need to empathize with why she finds it difficult to acknowledge responsibility while also being clear about the consequences. She may need your help to manage the consequences; for example, if she has been asked to clean the car to repay stolen money you may have to help or supervize.

Acting the Victim

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Demonstrating fear of verbal or physical aggression from sibling, friend, classmate and so on that is greater than you would expect.

Seeming to invite reactive responses from others.

Some children display major upset over small hurts yet are impervious to major hurts.

Some children alternate between 'victim' and 'aggressor'.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

Your child's early life history could have involved siblings competing for attention, food, nurture and so on, in order to survive, with a possibility that attention could have focused around sexual abuse. Siblings may have been the 'favourites' while your child was victimized or neglected.

Alternatively, your child might have been the 'favourite' and resents your attempts to treat your children more equally. Siblings could have been encouraged to be abusive towards each other. Aggressive relationships could have been set by the adults in their lives.

Your child may feel he is within his comfort zone, replicating his early environment. Your child may have very little self-esteem and could be feeling responsible for what has happened in the past, with the resultant shame.

What can I do?

Role play scenarios, helping your child find alternative responses. This could include role playing how to walk away. Help him to think about his emotions.

Use smiley face stickers to help him begin to desensitize himself – one colour for when he feels anxious, another colour when he feels sad. The differences between the two might help him to get his feelings into perspective.

Help him remember that he is now safe and with parents who can love all their children: *'I guess it's hard for you to remember that I love you when I'm paying attention to your sister.'*

TRIGGER

Any setting where your child mixes with children whom he perceives as intimidating or threatening.

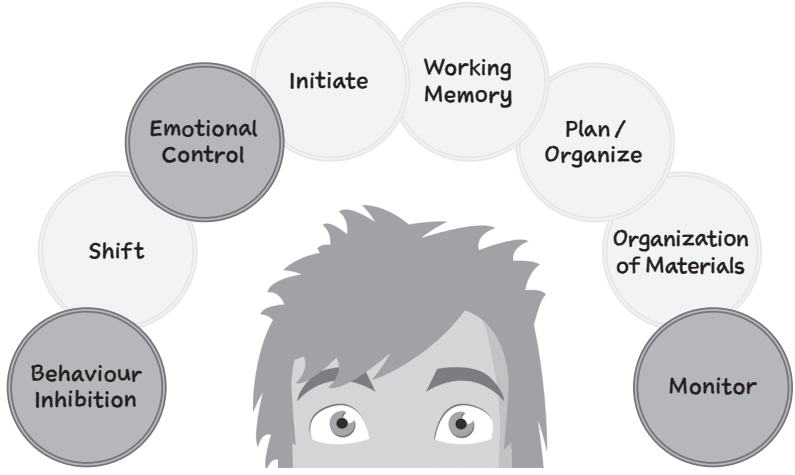
Situations where he feels he might gain attention or get a sibling into trouble.

Situations where your child is experiencing jealousy.

What can I do?

Children's safety (both physical and emotional) is the important issue here. Monitor the situation to ensure clarification of what is actually happening.

Validate your child's feelings: *'I know how difficult this is for you. The adults in your life will keep you safe.'*



Avoid settings in which your child can become a victim; separate siblings within the home or monitor their behaviour.

Find opportunities to develop your child's self-esteem. Praise should be specific, especially if your child struggles with praise. Use games and activities to praise your child for specific actions: *'You kicked that ball really well'* rather than *'You're a great kid.'*

Provide opportunities for him to talk to you. He may need support to do this. Give him a token he can hand to you if he is worried.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Children who have not had the opportunity to develop a primary attachment with their parents find it difficult to manage secondary attachments. Children who have suffered early developmental trauma often experience peer problems. Victimization can be real or imaginary, and it can be frustrating if it appears that your child courts aggression from others. It is important to recognize that the feelings are real to the child. His behaviour needs to be seen as his language, demonstrating possible anxiety and fear.

Let him know you understand this and can empathize with his difficulties. It might be helpful for you to respond to every hurt your child identifies. That way you may help fill the emotional gaps that are at the root cause of his behaviour and help your child to let go of the feelings that underlie it. Helping him to differentiate between 'big' hurts and 'little' hurts can also help, although this might have to be a secondary strategy.

Disrupting Others

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Inability to focus on her own activity.

Disrupting what siblings are doing.

Curiosity about sibling's activities.

Interfering with a sibling's game.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

Need for hyper-vigilance – a survival strategy learned as a baby. Attention or food given to a sibling might have exposed this child to trauma.

Feeling that you prefer another child.

Your child 'needs' to know what is going on and is unable to focus on one activity when there is another activity around her.

She may also have difficulty if asked to choose between activities as she will not want to 'miss out' on one activity for another.

Control issues – a need to be able to manage everything.

The 'buzz' in the house, which reminds the child of previous difficult situations.

Re-enactment of an early trauma bond.

What can I do?

Provide adult intervention to refocus your child.

She may need to sit near you.

Help your child to plan the task and perhaps remain with her while she begins.

Provide a timer so your child knows how long this activity will last.

Support her at the beginning and end of each task.

Validate her feelings verbally.

Closely monitor your children when they are playing together.

TRIGGER

Separate activities provided for each child.

Children being encouraged to share and play together.

Thinking her sibling is getting more love or attention.

Being unsure of what everyone else is doing.

Jealousy.

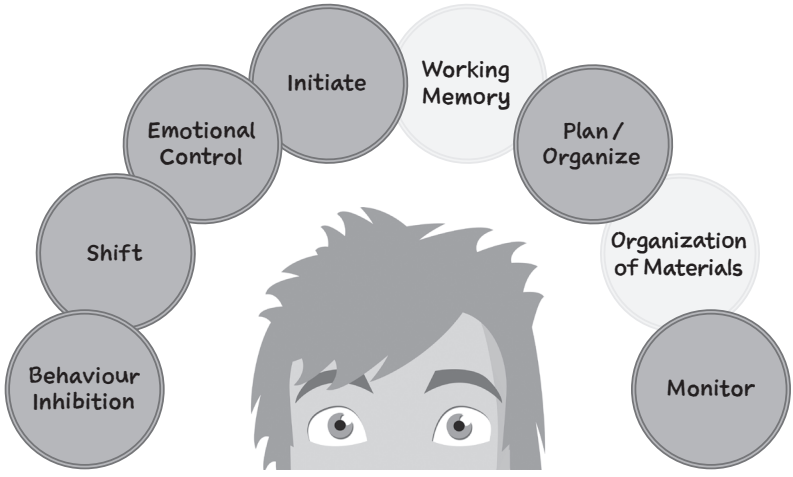
What can I do?

Empathize with your child's difficulties and validate her need to know all that is going on – *'I know it's hard for you to share with your sister and it's also hard for you to see your sister playing by herself.'* Or: *'I can see you find it hard to focus on your own activity.'* Or: *'I can see you're worried about what your sister is doing.'*

Show your child what her siblings are doing to satisfy her need.

Limit choices and help her to choose if necessary: *'I've looked out a special activity for you today.'*

Remind your child that you are a parent who can love all your children.



FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Developmental trauma often impacts on the sensory development of these children. Many demonstrate problems in focusing and are easily distracted by other things that are going on in the family. Often bedrooms are filled with a plethora of games and toys. Some children can find this too stimulating and may benefit from having an area that is less 'busy'. Although your child may need to work on her own at times, one aim is to encourage sibling interaction at a manageable level. Your child may need help to 'practise' this. This must not be presented as a punishment and care may have to be taken to ensure your child does not feel rejected. *'I know you find it hard to be with your sister. You never got a chance to practise being together safely when you were little. We're going to practise playing safely for five minutes. I'll sit with you while we practise.'*

It's important that you choose the sibling time carefully; choose the number of minutes you know your children can manage and suggest two minutes less; that way she can experience success rather than failure. If you allow your children to play together only to remove one child when she is struggling, she will experience this as failure regardless of how this is presented.

Similarly, it's better for your child to join at the end rather than the beginning of individual activity so that when the activity ends both children feel that this is 'fair'. Your child will benefit from adult attention and this should place her more in a position to manage.

Food Issues

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Hiding food, hoarding food.

Eating others' food.

Not eating lunch and other meals.

Fussy eating.

Eating inappropriately, for example only one type of food.

Never feeling full and always asking for extra.

Liking food one day and hating it the next.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

There are many possibilities for food issues.

Your child may have experienced extreme hunger or have suffered an inadequate or ill-balanced diet.

She may have had to fight others for food or eaten non-food objects. She may have undergone periods of food poisoning due to poor food hygiene practices. She may be unused to the type of food on offer.

She may see food issues as a way of maintaining control over her life. Eating disorders are often a way of coping with difficult feelings.

She may equate food with love.

Food might have been offered as a 'reward' for sexual abuse.

What can I do?

Involve her in considering strategies to help her.

Create a phrase that can be repeated to her until she can internalize it. *'There is always enough food in this house.'*

Place a daily menu on the fridge of the food, which also gives the timing of meals.

Offer a cuddle prior to meals to ensure she feels 'full' of love before eating.

Provide a menu with a tick list for children who are faddy or inconsistent.

TRIGGER

Any occasion where food is involved.

Feeling unloved.

Equating food with filling emotional gaps.

Sibling rivalry.

Fear that there will never be enough (of anything).

Worry about where the next meal is coming from.

Any situation where the child feels out of control.

Self-harming.

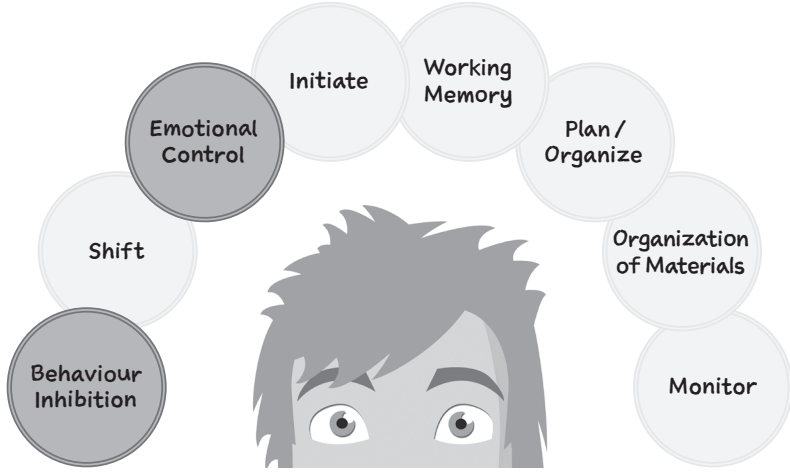
What can I do?

Analyze the situation to define the true nature of the difficulty: *'I think a cuddle might fill the hole in your heart better than food.'*

Validate her feelings: *'I know this is difficult for you. I'm here to support you.'*

Help her to practise other ways of managing: *'Why don't you practise leaving just your peas?'*

Eat pudding first to give your child a message that the treat is the healthy food!



Liaise with the school to ensure food issues are dealt with appropriately.

Don't get into battles about your child feeling her brother is getting more.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

School lunchtimes can be traumatizing for a child. Work with the school to ensure that your child's eating environment reflects her needs; consider whether packed lunches or school meals are most appropriate. It may be necessary to seek the advice of a clinical dietician to ensure that your child has the optimal menu that reflects her history.

Help your child know you understand why food is such an issue: *'If I had not had enough food when I was a baby I would worry about what was for dinner.'*

Sibling issues around food are not ones you can win; you won't be able to convince your children that you are being fair. Instead use empathy: *'I guess I would struggle to know I had enough if I'd been hungry as a baby.'*

Don't use food as a control issue; this is *not* a battle you can win. If your child doesn't eat, try not to show how worried you are. Try to find ways of offering food in a fun and non-stressful way. Try to consider the underlying reasons for the problem and work on these in an empathetic way; this may help to reduce the need to use food to mask underlying traumas. You might need to consider your own feelings around food. You're not being a 'bad' parent if your child refuses to eat healthy food – it's to do with her past.

Food issues need to be handled carefully. Serious food issues may need trained medical support and assistance.

Hypochondriac Tendencies

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Complaining constantly of minor ailments.

Often children who get very upset over minor things will be impervious to major hurts or accidents.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

If the behaviour happens in school it could be linked to a hope that your child will be sent home. A need to return home is likely to stem from anxiety about something in school, something at home or possibly anxiety about rejection and abandonment.

They may be 'ill' to gain reassurance that you care. Some children who cannot express their feelings overtly will use 'illness' to express their inner feelings.

What can I do?

Use your knowledge of your child's history to figure out what he is telling you. Be curious about your child's inner feelings: *'I wonder if this is really about...'*

Accept that your child's stomach ache is real (to him): *'Gosh, I can see you're really not feeling great at the moment. I wonder if a cuddle might help.'*

Remind your child that you will be collecting him from school as a way of providing reassurance. A photograph or memento of home will also help.

TRIGGER

Triggers could range from a variety of concerns, such as an inability to understand instructions, tasks they feel unable to complete, or a smell, sound, word, picture that produces a traumatic memory. These feelings are transferred into physical ailments.

Your child could be signalling an inner feeling that he cannot express overtly.

What can I do?

Try to warn your child of any impending change and be reassuring.

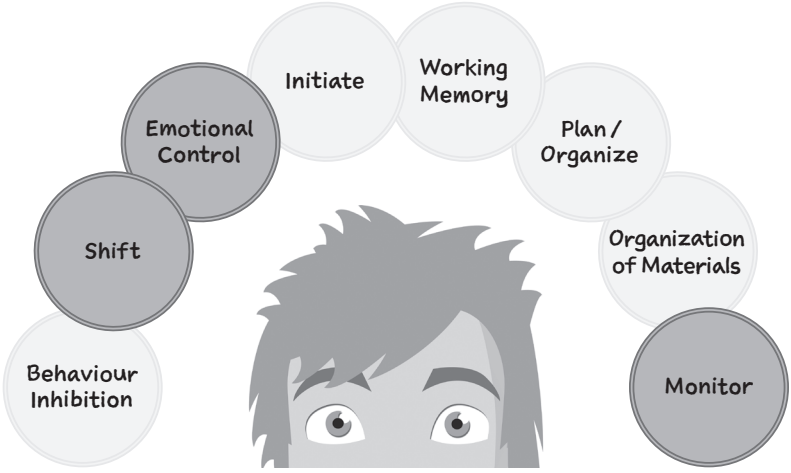
Act as a role model. Verbalize instances when you feel anxious and suggest strategies you use to calm yourself.

Validate your child's underlying feeling: *'I guess if I was really hurting inside I might have stomach pains.'*

Allow your child a special routine for coming into school so the teacher can be alerted if he is experiencing anxiety.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

If your child becomes accustomed to 'using' health issues to deal with emotional problems this could have long-term mental health consequences. It is vital that he is helped to address his feelings openly and get help to deal with these. However, you might want to use your child's 'illnesses' for a time to enhance attachments. This is especially relevant if your child has gone through a period of being impervious to



hurts, a 'strategy' some children have developed to manage early trauma.

In this situation, becoming upset over minor hurts might be a step on the road to repair. Having found ways to guard against experiencing pain he might find it hard to assess what is and is not a minor hurt. It might also be that, once your child can experience pain he needs to 'practise' this in minor pains while major hurts are still too overwhelming. It might also be a way of testing your love for him. In this situation, attending to your child's hurts both physically (a plaster) and emotionally (cuddles) is likely to help him.

School policy will dictate the circumstances for sending children home; no teacher wants an ill child in their class. This might be right in some situations but not always. Work with your child's teacher on strategies to manage your child's problems. Your child may be demonstrating his needs and extra time at home may help to improve attachments; however, this needs to be dictated by the adults rather than the child. This may be especially important if your child has siblings also vying for your attention. Use this time to develop your child's attachment to you; find books and strategies that will help foster attachment and experiment with those that work for you and your child. As your child's attachment increases you can begin to help him assess whether, on a scale of 1–10 this is a 'small' hurt or a 'big' hurt.

Intense Sibling Rivalry

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Verbal or physical aggression towards a sibling.

Intense tale-telling about a sibling or fear of a sibling.

Seeking out the sibling, perhaps in the context of 'helping'.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

Your child's early life history could have involved siblings competing for attention, food and nurture in order to survive.

There is a possibility that attention could have focused around sexual abuse.

One sibling could have been the 'favourite' while others were victimized or neglected.

The children could have been encouraged to be abusive towards each other.

Aggressive relationships could have been the example set by adults in their lives.

What can I do?

The safety of all family members must take priority.

Children should not play unsupervized.

Use monitors when the children are in bedrooms. Have a no-entry rule to a sibling's bedroom – even with permission from the sibling. Some children will 'invite' their siblings into their room even if it's potentially dangerous or unhelpful; for example, children who assume the victim role may need help to change that role; children who assume the aggressor role also need help to change. And some siblings move between aggressor and victim.

Be available to talk things over if the children need to. Provide them with an item to give you if they wish to talk, or use a toy for them to talk through: *'I can see how difficult it is for you to let me know that you are worried. If you leave your teddy on the chair, I will know that you have a worry that you want to talk about.' Or: 'I wonder what teddy might feel about this?'* You could also talk to teddy about what you might like to say to your child: *'Hi teddy (your child's name) I really want to let you know that I've noticed...'*

Give reassurance to a child who is afraid of his sibling: *'I know you worry about being hurt. We are going to help you be and feel safe.'*

TRIGGER

At home: any time the children are together unsupervized.

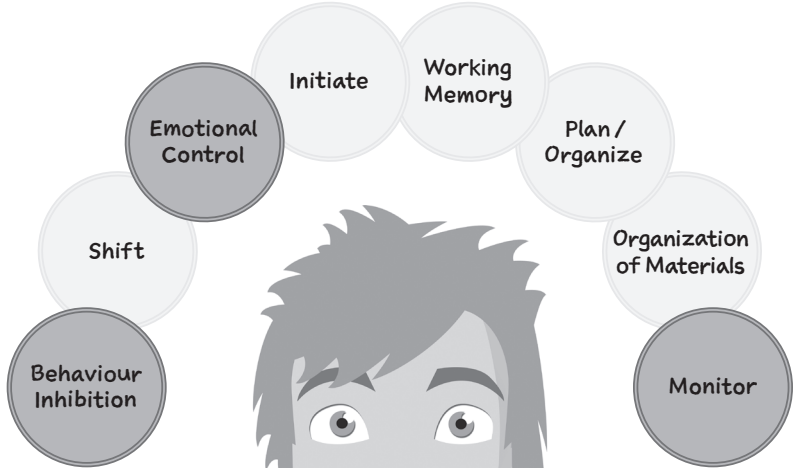
Children being asked to share or play games together.

In school: incidents prior to arrival at school, home time, playtimes, whole-school occasions, settings where two classes mix, such as paired reading, shared 'news' reminding pupil of an earlier incident.

What can I do?

Set clear ground rules about what acceptable and non-acceptable ways to act in your family.

Role play possible scenarios to explore alternative responses. This could be done by adults acting as the children.



Remind children of your expectations of behaviour before they meet up: *'I know how hard it is for you when we all play together. We are going to practise five minutes playing together to help you play safely.'*

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Although it may appear that one child is the perpetrator, be aware that each sibling is actually a victim. The behaviour of the abusive sibling is her language, demonstrating her anxiety and unhappiness.

It is important to be honest about this child's behaviour in a non-shaming way: *'I know you sometimes hit your brother. I guess you learned to do this when you were little. I can help you be with your brother in a different way. This will help you feel better about yourself and keep your brother safe. Each day we will practise this together; meanwhile, children are not allowed to play together unless I am there and you are not allowed in your brother's bedroom even if he says it's okay.'* You may have to be proactive in leading family discussions about safety and appropriate behaviour.

You need to be vigilant and not expect the victim to take the lead; she may not be able to do this and may feel guilty if she gets hurt and does not tell you. She needs to hear that it is the adult's job to notice what is happening and keep her safe, but also get the message that nobody in the family should need to keep secrets.

Role-model this yourself by adopting a 'zero tolerance' attitude to aggression from any of your children, and indeed any family member. Remember to include family pets in this embargo. Children who have sibling rivalry issues may also feel rivalrous towards pets and try to hurt them. In this situation, try to avoid pets being in the same room as the child when you are not there.

Tantrums

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Acting out.

Tantrums.

Aggression or violence.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

The instinctive survival behaviours of fight, flight or freeze. Fighting could have been your child's defence tactic.

Insecurity – your child has not established or internalized a sense of safety, possibly due to his earlier experiences of unsafe surroundings and adults.

Shame – he lives under the shadow of shame.

He feels he is 'rubbish' and so acts accordingly.

Control – a need to have control over others, either by violence or by exhibiting behaviours that cannot be controlled by others.

Fear is often triggered by something in the present that reminds your child of past traumas.

What can I do?

Intervention is better than addressing the behaviour afterwards.

Your child might manage better if he knows what is to happen during the day, so provide a daily programme, displayed in a prominent place.

Allow him to leave the room at the first sign of temper, providing a safe haven, preferably with an adult close by so he feels safe.

Try role play scenarios and cognitive anger-management techniques, helping him to recognize the signs that lead to tantrums and suggesting alternative ways to demonstrate anger or fear.

Support him in repeating a mantra to himself to help him to cope.

TRIGGER

Disappointment.

A perception of unfairness.

A challenging or shaming situation.

A feeling of fear or being threatened.

Feeling a failure.

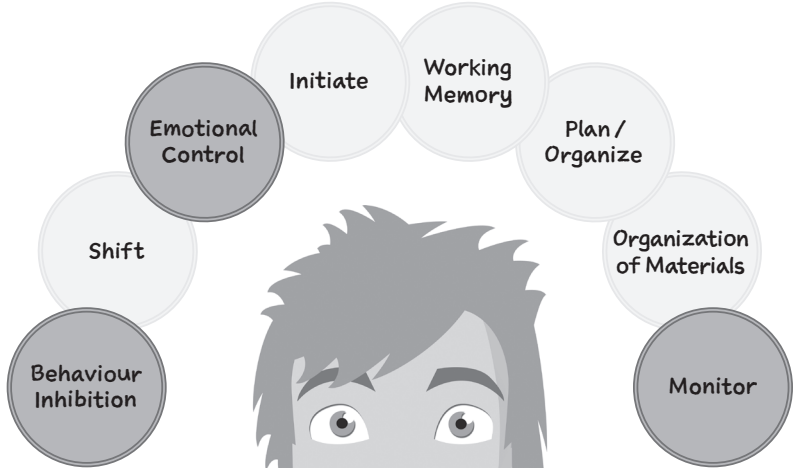
Possibly a topic, word, smell, facial expression, body movement, texture, sound, taste that evokes a memory.

What can I do?

Monitor possible volatile settings with a view to intervening before the situation develops.

Validate your child's feelings: *'I know you are very angry. I know you panic when you think you can't manage...'*

Help your child feel he can succeed. You can help him recognize situations where he will struggle: *'We are going to tidy your room and I know that makes you angry. Can I help you with these feelings before we start tidying your room?'*



FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Often parents of younger children are told that their child's behaviour is 'normal' and it is just the 'terrible twos'.

If you feel that your child's behaviour is more extreme than this, then go with your gut feeling and address the issue. Your child needs to develop emotional control and a feeling of safety to grow and develop. He needs your help to do this.

The sooner you begin the better; it's easier to tackle tantrums with a four-year-old than it is to deal with an aggressive teenager. An older child may have the emotional age of a toddler. As such, he needs an external regulator to act as a role model to guide and support him. Although you need to keep yourself and other family members safe, 'time out' acts as another rejection. You therefore need to work out a plan in advance to manage your child's behaviour and your response.

Letting your child know what to expect in advance should reduce feelings of rejection and also give him the clear message that you can handle his behaviour. This is crucial as your child feels out of control and uncontrollable.

Your child needs to experience adults being in loving control. Try to create win–win situations: *'I guess...will make you angry.'* If your child becomes angry you can thank him for letting you know that you are getting to know him so well; if he doesn't become angry you can congratulate him on feeling safe enough to handle the situation, then wonder how he will manage tomorrow (don't suggest that managing today means he should manage tomorrow as this sets up a potentially confrontational situation).

Running Away

OBSERVED BEHAVIOUR

Running away from home.

ATTACHMENT/ DEVELOPMENTAL TRAUMA ISSUE

Fear, insecurity, a sense of unworthiness, shame and rejection are all key to this type of behaviour.

The child may feel a need to abandon before being abandoned.

Peer pressure combined with low self-esteem and a need to be accepted might also be factors.

What can I do?

Validate your child's concern. It is crucial to keep calm. If your child has a history of absconding, she may need to be closely supervised.

Your child needs to know that the adults in her life can keep her safe. She needs to understand that interventions to prevent her from absconding are measures to keep her safe rather than a punishment.

If a group of peers are absconding together, police involvement may be necessary.

Providing a photograph or item from home can give reassurance and can serve as a reminder that you are there for her when she returns.

TRIGGER

A particular incident or anticipated activity triggering feelings from the past.

Not wanting to hear what a parent is saying.

Fear of abandonment.

A need to check that you care enough to look for her.

Feeling that she can't do anything right; low self-esteem.

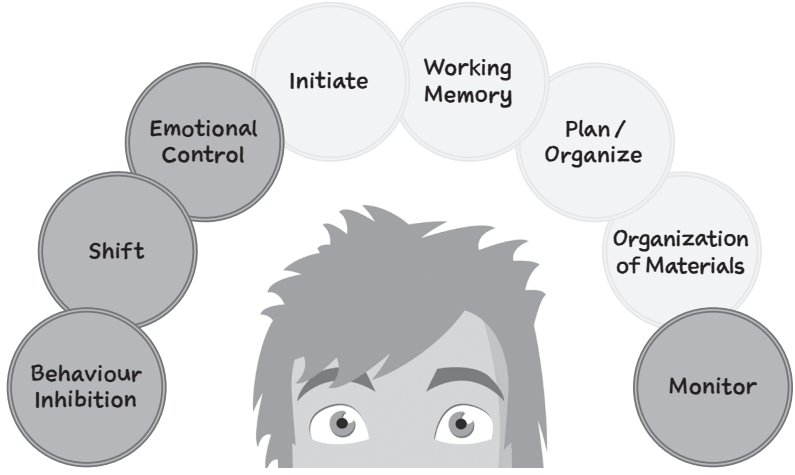
What can I do?

Discuss the underlying reasons for her difficulties at a time when she is calm to help her understand and appreciate adult concerns regarding her vulnerability and safety.

Look for triggers and empathetically acknowledge these.

Provide alternative strategies for her when she feels anxious or threatened, for example allow her the possibility of going into the garden or her room.

Role play scenarios so that these strategies can become embedded.



FURTHER REFLECTIONS

The level of vulnerability will dictate the prevention and management of this behaviour. Safety has to be the primary concern, especially in light of the vulnerability of these youngsters. However, if your child is also aggressive, leaving the house for a short period may be a better alternative to angry outbursts where others are put at risk. The key is to work with your child to give her the message that you can help her manage her feelings and behaviours. Helping your child to recognize that her behaviour may emanate from her past might help her to recognize that you will not abandon her: *'I guess I would find it difficult to believe my mum would be there for me if I had been let down in the way you have. If I had these feelings I guess I would like to run away from them.'* Try to identify triggers and talk to your child about these when she is calm: *'I've noticed that you often run away when you've had a tricky day at school. Do you know I love you even when you've been struggling in school?'*

You could suggest running away with her or agreeing a 'running away venue' or a 'running away time'. This could be agreed on the basis that, if your worries are lessened, you won't need to report her missing.

Offering a 'running away goody bag' with snacks might demonstrate that you care about her health and safety. Here the 'trick' is to offer the goody bag with humour and empathy. This is not likely to increase her running away; instead, it might reduce it as your concern will counteract the abandonment fears that are the underlying reasons for the behaviour. If you need to talk about a difficult subject, set this up in advance: *'I know you're going to find this discussion hard and I guess you might want to run away. However, I do need to talk to you about... Maybe we can agree on a five-minute discussion and see how that feels?'* Playing games like 'hide 'n seek' might help. Role play how you manage angry feelings. For example, talk about how frustrated you felt when your washing machine broke down and how you really wanted to run out of the house to get away from the washing but that on reflection you decided to go into the garden and have a good scream instead.