



CHALLENGES of CHILDREN in Foster Care

What to expect from the unexpected?

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Challenges of Children in Foster Care:

What to expect from the unexpected?

I arrived at my foster family's house! This booklet describes what I would like my foster family to know about me, so that they understand and know how to deal with my behaviour and reactions, which will help me feel well integrated.

If you have any doubts, you can count on the team that accompanies me and oversees my foster care process.

Why can I be different from other children?

Many children who are in foster care, like me, may have been exposed to more challenging, difficult, or dangerous situations that can cause trauma, and that other children living with their biological families, have not experienced. Examples of these situations are when birth parents

neglected us, mistreated us (physically, psychologically, or emotionally), sexually abused us, or abandoned us. Other situations can also be exposure to domestic violence, substance use or mental disorders by our parents.



When we are exposed to these situations, we are constantly on alert and worried that our needs (e. g. food, sleep, affection...) won't be met. Therefore, our brains and bodies do not develop in the same way as in a child who is not exposed to such situations.

What makes me have

different behaviours and reactions from other children?



When these situations take place, we start focusing on the danger around us, while trying to find a way to deal with the fear and uncertainty we feel in the environment around us.

This fear and uncertainty affects our development due to the "toxic stress" which results from the state of alert that we need to maintain due to the situations of mistreatment, neglect and abuse that we have been subjected to. This type of stress has negative implications for our development and for the way we interact with the environment and relate to others.

What are the reactions I can have when I'm in a new house?

Fear and constant alertness can lead me to exhibit some behaviours that are different from most children which are called "survival reactions". These reactions make me feel safe and are mechanisms with which I've learned to protect myself. So, if I show any of these reactions when I'm with you, don't feel like I'm against you. I'm just trying to protect myself the best way I know. My reactions might be:



"Freeze".

I may seem very confused, anxious, aloof, or distant, and even not able to respond to what is asked of me. I tend to be very attentive and seem to be looking for ways to escape and disappear. I feel ashamed. I'm afraid of failing and that you'll reject me, if I do.



Be submissive.

I can be sad and have a passive attitude. I don't like being the centre of attention, I want to be invisible and, as a result, I tend to avoid or withdraw from interactions with other people. I feel guilty, hopeless for the future and ready to give up.

Flee.

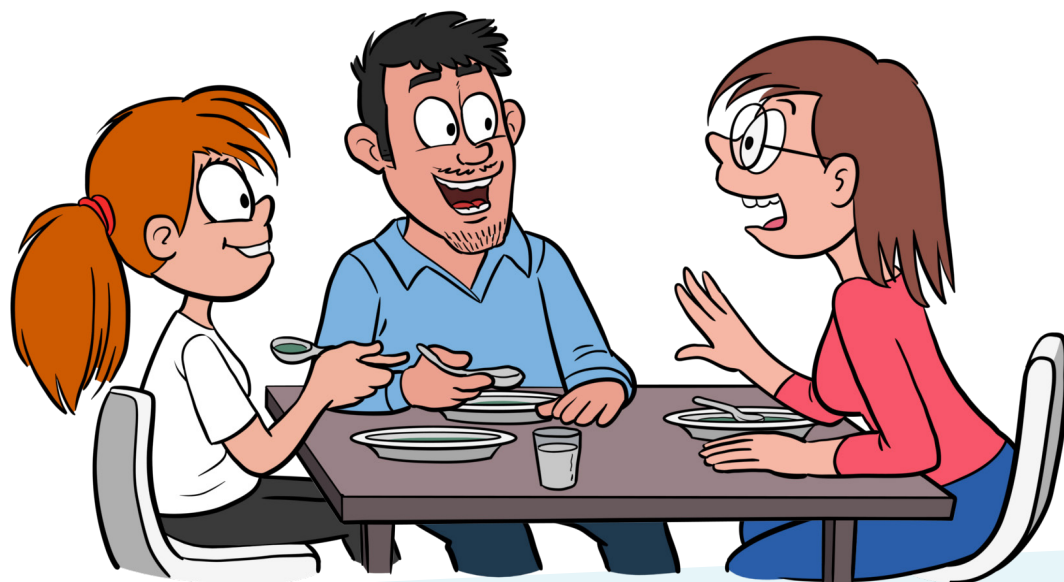
I may run away from adults (e. g., hide behind a table), be constantly restless, and be noisy. I have difficulty concentrating. I'm in a constant state of hypervigilance and I just want to find a safe place. I feel alone and I think I'm worthless.

Fight.

I need to control the situations around me and make them predictable to feel safe. I have difficulties following rules and I may lie or blame others for situations that happen or that I may have created. I feel that I have to "attack" to defend myself from some kind of danger that may arise (whether that danger is real or perceived).



— NELSON —



Even though I'm no longer in the environment that made me feel scared, my brain doesn't know about it. Thus, I may continue to have some of these reactions. This is because my brain registered this information and applied it to all situations and people around me. Unpredictability has always been a constant in my life, and I can still feel like I'm in danger and feel scared, even though I'm in a safe environment.

My previous relationships with adults may have been dysfunctional or abusive and therefore I may have learned that adults can hurt, abuse, ignore, reject, humiliate, and abandon us. My reactions are just ways to protect myself and avoid being hurt again.

Why do I keep having these reactions, even if I am safe and in the protected environment?

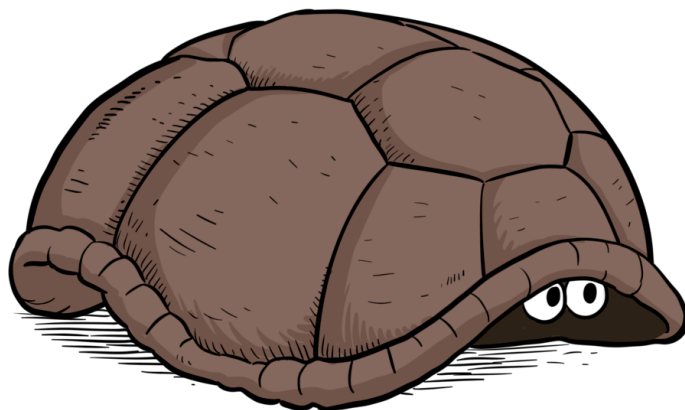
-NELSON-



What is important for you to know when you take care of me?

It is important that you remember that these kinds of behaviour were mechanisms and strategies that I found to defend myself and that helped me feel safe. I may still not feel safe in your home and in your presence and continue to act according to the negative

representations I have of other adults, projecting them onto you. This might make you feel like I misbehaved on purpose, but that's not true. These types of behaviour of mine are related to the traumatic experiences I had previously.



—NELSON—



What do you need to consider when you receive me at your home?

It is essential that you have access to information about my past, experiences I've had and dangerous or traumatic situations I've been exposed to. If you know what happened to me, it might be easier for you to help me change my behaviour in the future. Having this information can also keep you from feeling inadequate or unable to manage my difficult behaviour and from feeling frustrated or wanting to give up.



What kinds of other behaviours can I display later?

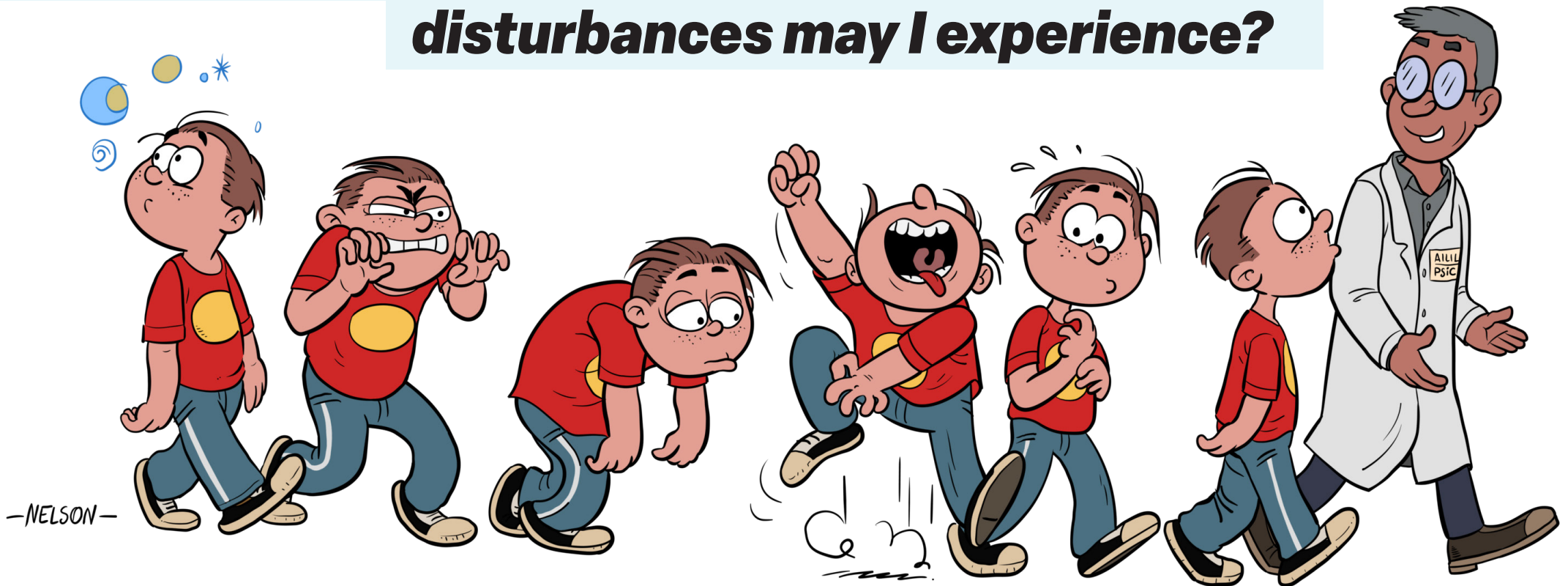
I might experience difficulties:

- Sleeping;
- Eating;
- Concentrating;
- Keeping my emotions under control;
- Managing conflicts.

I need your help to develop and readapt my behaviour now that I am in a safe environment.



What other difficulties/or disturbances may I experience?



I may develop other more serious deficits and disorders, such as:

- Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder;
- Neurodevelopmental difficulties or disorders;
- Emotional dysregulation;
- Aggressiveness;
- Childhood depression;
- Anxiety;
- Isolation, distancing and withdrawal from social interactions;
- Antisocial behaviour (e. g. not respecting rules, being violent, trying to manipulate others);
- Attachment disorders.

In these cases, other types of support, such as psychological, developmental or child psychiatry appointments, may be useful, if necessary. Don't be afraid to ask other people or professionals for help. It is important that I have all the support I need, and you are the first source of that support.

What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

Throughout my life, I may demonstrate some behaviour that you may find challenging and difficult to manage, due to my previous experiences. But I want you to know that these are common types of behaviour in children who have gone through the same thing as me and that I will need more time and patience on your part to be able to change them. There are some strategies you can use to help me! So...

As a baby I can...



Cry a lot (more than other babies)

That's why I need... more help to calm down. I may not have had consistent care and I learned that crying intensely is one of the ways I get attention and get my needs met. You can cuddle me, wrap me in a soft blanket, rock me and reduce external stimuli such as light and sounds to help me calm down. You can also speak calmly and reassuringly so I know I'm safe and can calm down.

Take a long time to fall asleep

That's why I need... you to help me relax so I can fall asleep. I may be afraid of falling asleep, as this is a time when I feel most alone and vulnerable. You can use the same technique you use when I cry a lot, but it can also help if you rock me and let me fall asleep next to you. You can decrease the stimuli around me (e. g. bright light and loud sounds) so that I recognize when it's time to rest.

Not want to eat

That's why I need you to be patient and calm and respect my own rhythm. As I didn't have access to certain foods, I didn't learn to like their taste. I may not feel safe enough to eat, so you should stay calm and talk to me during meals, without being persistent and strict. It will help if you reduce the stimuli around me, such as television or objects that distract me from the meal.

What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

**As a toddler and pre-schooler
(2 to 6 years old), I can...**



Throw very intense tantrums

That's why I need... you to help me regulate my emotions. I may not know how to calm myself down and manage my emotions and I need your help to do so. You can, for example, hold my hand, hug me and comfort me, holding me, if I feel comfortable with your closeness and touch. You can rock and soothe me with instructions and a soft voice. You can verbalize what you think I am feeling ("are you angry about..." or "are you sad because..."). Remember that I may need my space and time to try to regulate myself and it is important that you avoid raising your voice or yell at me, as I may get scared and lose my trust in you.

Have self- comforting behaviour

That's why I need... you to help me learn how to properly calm down. I may have learned that behaviour's such as rocking or bumping my head against objects or walls help me to calm down. It's important that you break this pattern, so I don't hurt myself. It may be necessary for you to physically contain me, hugging me and preventing me from hurting myself. Then you must comfort me physically and verbally, hugging and reassuring me. You can assure me that everything is fine and that you will stay with me until I feel better. It might be helpful if you show me other ways to comfort myself, like holding and hugging a toy or stuffed animal that I like or wrapping me in a blanket that you know I like.

What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

As a toddler and pre-schooler (2 to 6 years old), I can...

Overeat or hide my food

That's why I need you to teach me that I will always have food available. I may be afraid of not having my food when I want or need it, and therefore I may hide it, overeat, or say I don't feel full or satisfied after meals.

You can help me change this behaviour by having a lunchbox of snacks, and other healthy foods always available. You can distract me when we finish meals, playing with me or diverting my attention to other activities.

Have difficulty falling asleep

That's why I need... you to help me get some rest and relax. I can be in a constant state of alert and not be able to sleep easily.

It's important that you start by establishing a consistent sleep routine that helps me calm down which will teach me what happens before I go to sleep, so that I know what I can expect at that time of day. You can also make

sure I know that, at a certain time of the day, my room is only for sleeping, by keeping my toys in another room or in a box. It might help if you limit my access to TV and electronic devices before I go to sleep.

Not be able to sleep alone

That's why I need you to teach me how to calm down and how to sleep on my own. I may be afraid of the dark, of the new house or of being abandoned.

I need you to help me understand that everything is okay and that I'm safe. You can start by sitting next to me on the bed if I'm comfortable with that, or by giving me your hand. Then, gradually, you can move away, sitting in a chair next to me, then across the room, and finally out of the room. To help with this process, you can give me a teddy bear or a blanket that I like, so that I feel comforted and cosy. You can make bedtime a relaxing and calming activity by, for example, telling me a story, reading a story with me, or by look at a book together. Try to remember that this process is time

consuming, but it is important that you are consistent in doing it so that I learn how to sleep on my own.

Misbehave

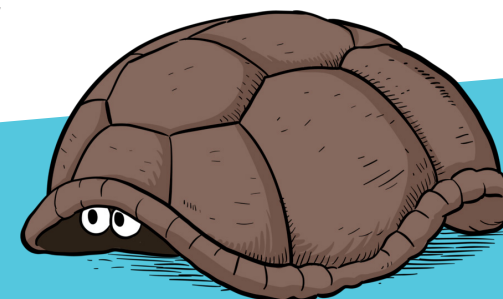
That's why I need... you to help me regulate my behaviour. I may have difficulty dealing with frustration and controlling my impulses, which comes across as "misbehaving".

To help me, you must use a calm but firm voice and tell me that I need to stop, while explaining why this behaviour is unacceptable. It's not enough to just tell me "Stop!", "Because it's bad" or "Because I say no". It is important that you tell me what the right behaviour is and that you be an example, so I know what is expected of me in that situation. In addition, it is essential that you avoid using a loud or harsh tone of voice,

as this can scare me, which could have the opposite effect, making me behave even worse.

Reassure me that you like me, but that you will not tolerate these kinds of behaviour and that you will help me change it by setting boundaries clearly and consistently.

You should also consider that I can act like a younger child and have some reactions that are not appropriate for my age. As I adapt to the family, you can try to change that pattern, but you must respect my rhythm and adapt your behaviour to the evolution of mine.



What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

**As an older child
(7 to 10 years old), I can...**

Have difficulty dealing with my emotions



—NELSON—

That's why I need... you to help me regulate the intensity of my emotions. I may not be able to regulate my emotions on my own. You can help me by teaching me how to use words to express what I'm feeling and how to tell others how I feel. If I fail to do so, I may feel even more frustrated. Pay attention to my signs of frustration as they begin to manifest. It helps me to understand how I can adequately express my emotions, using my body to calm myself down by doing, for example, deep breathing exercises.

Also, you can show me other ways of expressing my anger or frustration, making drawings to show what I feel.

Feel confused and disoriented

That's why I need... you to help me feel safe and organized by making it clear what I can expect from you and the environment around me. I need stability and to know what to expect from other people or situations on a daily basis. You can help keep events or appointments organized through tables, graphs, reminders and by establishing predictable routines. I may also need additional reminders and more specific, direct instructions for doing certain tasks. For example, when you ask me to do something, do it specifically: "Can you pack your backpack for school? Remember to put the pencil case, books, and notebooks for the subjects you will have tomorrow.", instead of just "can you go prepare your backpack?".

Be anxious, sad or isolate myself

That's why I need... you to help me manage the emotions I'm feeling. I may begin to show signs of depression, anxiety, or even isolation, due to thoughts and memories of my past experiences. You need to encourage me to use my words to try to

explain how I feel and why I feel the way I do. You can distract me by talking about things that make me feel better. If I'm anxious, talk to me to understand what makes me feel this way. Then you can teach me what I can do to feel better, such as doing relaxation and breathing exercises, doing an activity with me, or encouraging me to think about funny things.

Complain of physical pain

That's why I need... you to help me understand what's going on. I can complain of pain, even after I have been seen by a doctor and they have ruled out an injury or illness. It is important that you don't devalue what I feel and that you consider that I may feel this way because of the previous trauma I went through. You can help ease these pains by helping me to calm down and by pampering me. You can use breathing exercises, massages, talk about how I feel or direct me to activities that you know I enjoy and that are comforting to me.

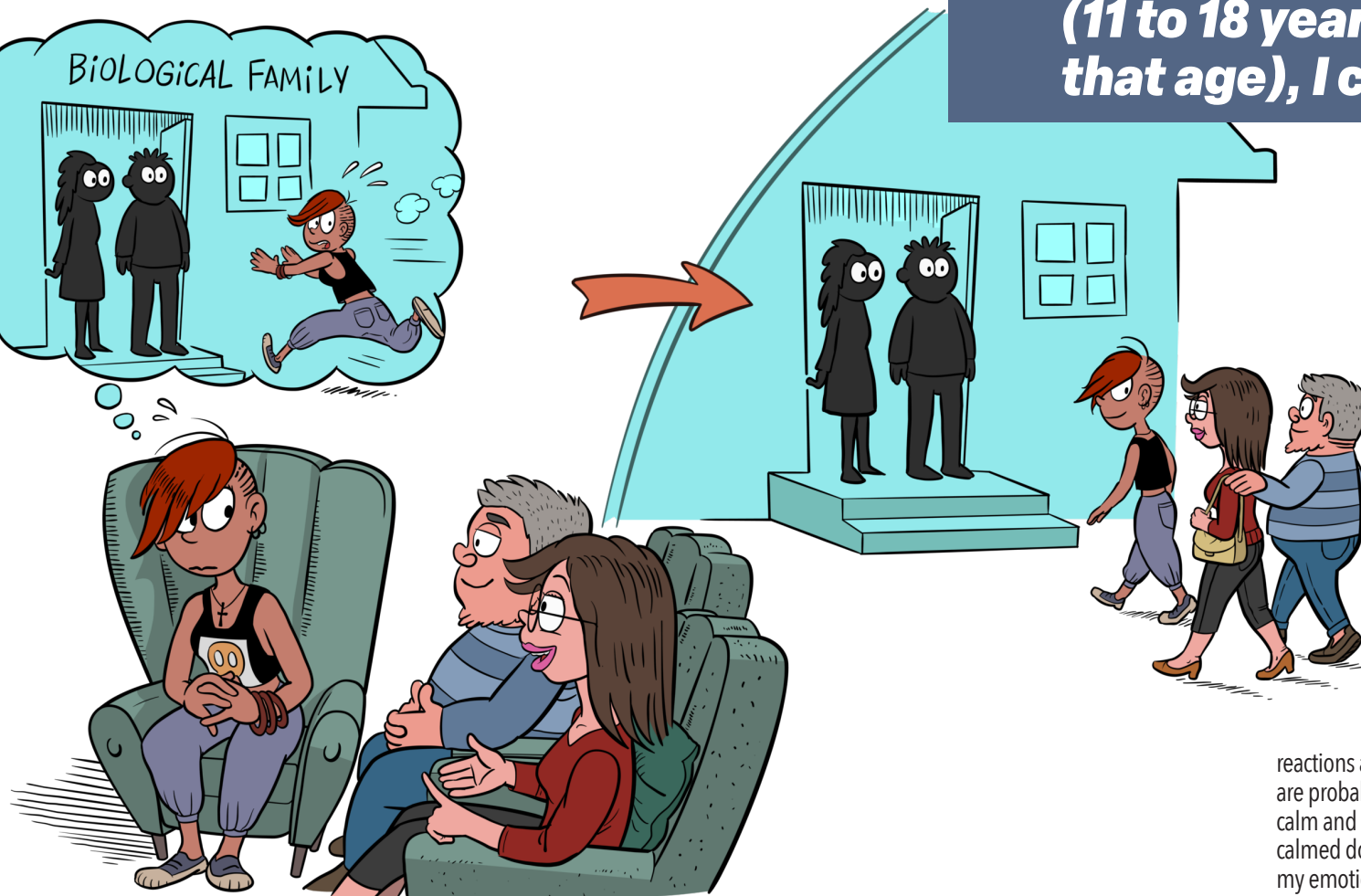
What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

**As a pre-teen or teenager
(11 to 18 years old and beyond
that age), I can ...**

Feel disproportionate emotions in response to situations

That's why I need... you to help me adjust the intensity of my emotions to situations. I may display more intense emotions that are not consistent with the situations I experience, potentially due to exposure to a prior trauma that I associate with the current situation and that has not been well managed and resolved. You can help me by talking to me about it, showing understanding of my frustration, but helping me to have a new perspective. You can also direct me to my five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) so that I can relax. You can suggest activities that are relaxing and that distract me, like listening to music, watching a movie, playing a board game with me, going for a walk, or having a snack that I like. My intense reactions are not necessarily directed at you. My anger and frustration are probably associated with negative past experiences. Try to keep calm and not take my attitudes and behaviour personally. Once I've calmed down, you can talk to me about signs my body sends when my emotions are getting out of hand and how I can stay calm and control them again.

—NELSON—



What patterns of behaviour can I display throughout my life?

**As a pre-teen or teenager
(11 to 18 years old and beyond that age), I can ...**

Have impulsive behaviour and reactions

That's why I need... you to help me think before I act. I may tend to be more impulsive than other teens and I may have difficulty associating my behaviours with real consequences.

You can help me understand that all my behaviours and decisions have consequences for me and, sometimes, for others. For example, if in a moment of anger, I break or destroy any of my belongings, do not feel obligated to replace it (unless it is essential). It is important that I understand that my actions have consequences. You can also give me examples of impulsive choices with negative consequences that happened in situations around me. For example, you can use protagonists' decisions or behaviours in movies or series to exemplify why it's important to think before you act. Then you can discuss with me other decisions and behaviours that characters or people might have adopted in those situations. I need you to reassure me that you like me even though you don't like my behaviour.

Conveying that I don't need anyone and that I know how to take care of myself

That's why I need... you to help me trust the care and help that other people can give me. Sometimes I may feel that I can take care of myself and that I don't need anyone else. I may demonstrate greater resistance accepting you as my caregiver or fear that you will hurt me and, therefore, I may isolate myself or have more challenging and behaviours directed against you, testing if you still like me.

You can help me by promoting my self-esteem and the idea that I can trust you and count on you when I need help. You can also reinforce the idea that I deserve to be cared for, supported, and helped by others.

However, you can promote my independence by teaching me specific skills that I will need in the future, giving me the opportunity to learn how to do certain tasks on my own (e. g. cooking and going places by myself).

Substance and alcohol use

That's why I need... you to help me avoid or reduce the consumption of these substances. I may be more predisposed to consume alcohol and marijuana than most teenagers, for example, because I am more likely to miss school or because I am in a group of friends who also consume. You can help me by adopting a reward system, with activities or other incentives that are important to me and by valuing my appropriate attitudes and behaviours.

You can use this system to encourage me to be more involved at school and to prevent me from spending so much time with friends whose behaviours are not the most appropriate. You could also consider finding a mentor (for example, a sports coach) to accompany me and encourage my involvement or collaborate with teachers, so that I have more monitoring when I am not at home.

Wanting to run away from home

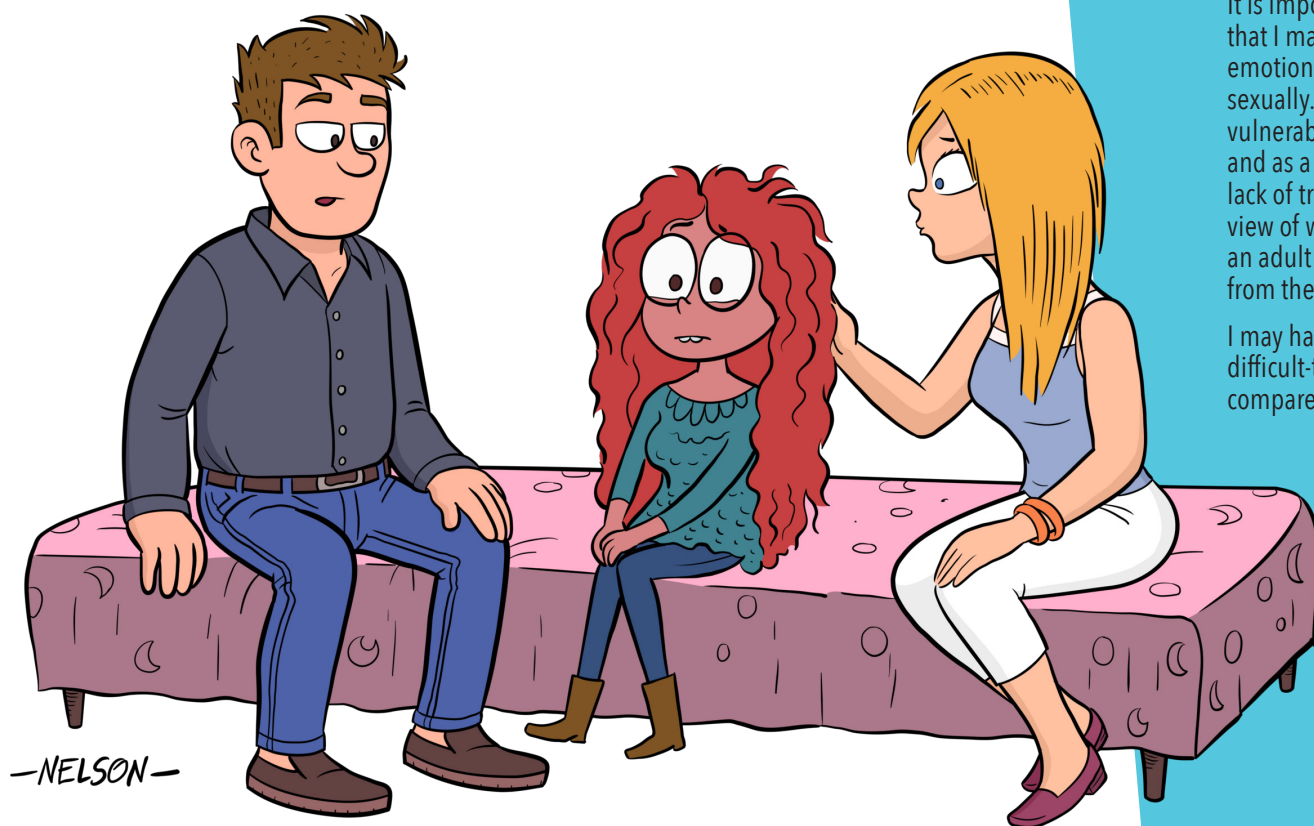
That's why I need... you to help me understand that I don't have to run away from home to do things I want or see people I care about. I may want to run away to keep in touch with my biological family, to assist my parents or siblings, or to find some security, comfort, connection, and normality in my life.

You can help me by analysing why I feel the need to run away and by making the activities I like or want to do more accessible, so that I feel more involved in the family environment. Another strategy is to propose a "behavioural contract", rewarding appropriate behaviours and valuing my skills. For example, asking permission to go out, always reporting where I am, going to school consistently and without skipping, doing my homework, and not running away from home.

In case I run away from home because I want to see my biological family, you can establish a calendar and a visit plan that is safe, with my favourite people, for example my parents, siblings or other family members and friends, so that I don't feel like I have to run away to see them. Consult the team of technicians who accompany my process on the best way to carry out these visits.

Other behaviours that might occur if:

I was a victim of sexual abuse...



If I have been a victim of sexual abuse, I may need you to help me and to be more patient, dedicate more time and availability to deal with my complex behaviours and needs.

It is important for you to remember that I may have been abused emotionally as well as physically and sexually. I may also have become vulnerable in the face of my abuser, and as a result, I may experience fear, lack of trust, and have a distorted view of what normal interactions with an adult are and what I should expect from them.

I may have more challenging and difficult-to-manage behaviours compared to other children, such as:

- Aggressive behaviours such as aggressive language, hitting, kicking, spitting, grabbing and throwing objects at other people;
- Destructive or avoidant behaviours, such as cutting things, destroying property, lying, wanting and/or trying to run away. I may have difficulty controlling myself, have incontinence or, even, suffer from enuresis (not controlling urine) and encopresis (not controlling the expulsion of stools);
- Sexualised, inappropriate or abusive behaviour, such as masturbating in public, compulsively masturbating (which can cause injury and wounds), exposing myself or undressing in front of others, touching or playing with other children inappropriately, using sexualized language or making sexual advances towards adults.

Other behaviours that might occur if:

I was a victim of sexual abuse...

These behaviours and characteristics can be more challenging and will require well-informed and sensitive responses, either from you or from other adults and professionals who contact me. You should inform yourself about how sexual abuse can influence my development, functioning and self-esteem, as well as about the situation of abuse I experienced. This information will help you to know what implications it may have on the daily functioning of family life, such as bath time, bedtime and occasions for gifts or other important events.

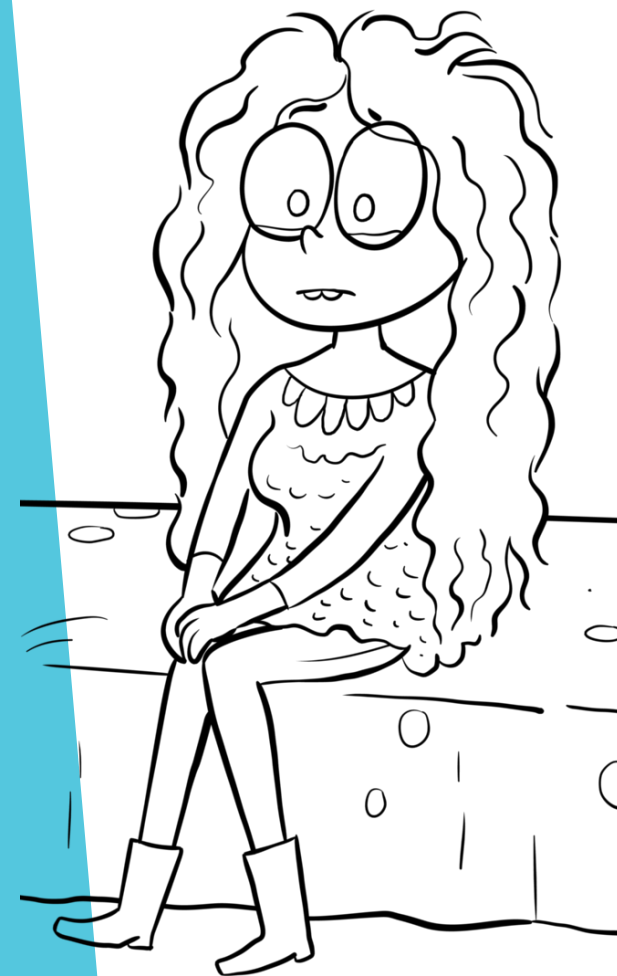
You must reflect on and understand your own feelings and prejudices about sexual abuse, so that you can have and model appropriate behaviours that help me deal with my own feelings. You can help me change my

behaviour and understand what is normal, healthy and expected in my relationships with others and particularly with adults. It is important that you create an environment suited to my needs and use strategies to deal with my abuse-related behaviours, such as:

- Establish clear and firm "loving boundaries" – Establish boundaries regarding my personal space and that of others. You can make a schedule that determines the situations in which I should give space to other people and vice versa.
- Establish rules for behaviours of a sexual nature – Establish firm rules about what behaviours are acceptable or not. You can explain to me, in a simple way, by doing an activity with me, about the behaviours that are

acceptable. This activity consists of drawing a person or a body and identifying which parts can be touched only by me or by other people (and by whom), as well as which parts can be touched public or in private.

- If my behaviours do not improve and they start to have negative effects on my daily functioning or that of the family, you should ask for help and seek psychotherapeutic support.



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USEFUL CONTACTS



Project "Conscious Parent Academy - Replacement parent urgently needed!"

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Title

Challenges of Children in Foster Care: What to expect from the unexpected?

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These are some of the challenges that we might face together during my stay with you. I want you to know that, even though it is a long journey, I'm sure we will learn a lot from each other, always within a safe, patient and loving relationship.

Just remember, that all of us are doing our best to grow together and to create healthy and caring bonds.



