

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect  
in their early lives

## Spoiling Good Times: why it happens and how to handle it

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives sometimes seem to have difficulties with allowing themselves to have a nice time. This can be a real cause of frustration to carers and spoil the growing sense of attachment between child and carer.

### What you might see

- A child might be looking forward to a planned special event e.g. a party, a trip to the zoo, a holiday but then does something beforehand that makes you feel that you can no longer take them because they have behaved so badly
- A child making a scene during the event which spoils it for everybody e.g. you might take them to a wider family celebration
- A child enjoying the event and behaving well but then messing up big time on the return home or in the next few days
- The event goes really well and everyone seems to have had a lovely time but in the next few weeks you realise that all was not as it seemed e.g. the money that you thought you had lost on the day was actually stolen by the child

### How it can feel

- Hurtful, rejecting of you and your loved ones
- That its eating away at your motivation for fostering
- That your gift of caring is being thrown back in your face
- For a child in a longer term placement with you, a sense of failure that you haven't had a bigger effect
- That you can never relax and enjoy something
- That the child is ruining things for your family
- That you've been tricked and made to look and feel silly
- Embarrassing if they kick off in public or in front of people who matter to you
- That you can't plan or look forward to nice events
- That managing your children and the foster child seems too difficult because they have such different needs



### Why these children may spoil good times

- Easier and safer to destroy the experience than risk building a new world view i.e. changing from those grey lenses
- Don't see themselves as deserving a nice experience - doesn't fit with their grey lens
- Operating at such a high level of stress that the extra stress that even a nice thing can cause is the last straw
- Don't have the experience to know how to respond when experiencing fun and love
- Can't tolerate nice feelings for themselves or seeing others have a good time
- Children anticipate that these nice times will end because life has taught them that bad times are always just around the corner. They fear the loss of good times so badly that it's easier and safer to make the bad times come now than wait for them to happen
- It also doesn't fit with their experience of adults - waiting for the bad bit to happen
- They need to be in control of their lives more than they want to have a good time.
- The power of destroying an experience feels good to them because they can be in control; they can make others feel as badly as they do

A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here.

## Some suggestions that may help



### Beforehand:

- Plan small things, don't overload the child in your effort to make things nice
- Resist your urge to make a big deal out of birthdays and Christmas
- Don't give too much notice to special events if possible - possibly no notice at all - though children vary a great deal with this
- If they do know about an event, talk them through it frequently with lots of understanding and empathy
- Talk about their fears openly and reassure them that you will be there to help them
- Talk about what exactly will happen and teach new behaviour by talking about how other children tend to respond
- Make plan B (and C, D, E and F) in case things go wrong. This needs to include details of who, where, when etc
- Talk to other adults who will be at the event to explain and prepare them
- If an event is really important to you, it might be better to arrange alternative care for your child rather than risk things going badly wrong

### If it's gone wrong

- Try to stay as calm as possible
- Respond with empathy for their feelings, worries and difficulties
- Calmly carry out your plan B, moving to plans C, D, E and F if necessary!
- Provide calm logical consequences for the disruptive behaviour without irritation and anger

### Afterwards

- Talk to the child about what happened when you feel calm and can show the child that you will support them and believe they can do things differently in future
- Identify for yourself the skills that your child is finding hard and practice them through role-play, talking through situations etc
- Plan another smaller event fairly soon to allow them to practise their increasing skills and get it right this time
- It's possible that the child may show no remorse. Remember that they have deep feelings that tell them they are bad. It is hard to face things that they have done wrong without being overwhelmed by these feelings
- Reward yourself for getting through a difficult time.
- **Remember your child's behaviour is not personal but often feels like it**

