

Q: My foster child can be amazingly manipulative, all the time! If I lovingly respond to her, am I not just reinforcing this behavior?

A: This is a GREAT question and I know it is an issue in which many parents struggle. As with all negative behaviors, I believe manipulation is a communication for connection with the parent. Paradoxically, when our children demonstrate this behavior, it does quite the opposite to us. It creates an uneasy feeling within us, constricts us, and in many cases, repulses us away from our child.

Let's step back and look at early childhood interactions between the parent and the infant. It is there that we will find the roots of manipulative behavior and will be able to create a new understanding.

The very first relationship an infant is designed to experience is the relationship with the mother. This relationship begins in the womb and is designed to continue at a high level of intensity for at least the next three years of life, along with the father/child relationship. It is in these first three years that amazing development and connection happens due to the parents' attention, attunement, and devotion.

According to Dr. Allan Shore, the "King" of affect regulation, these parent/child interactions occur primarily in the right brain. The right brain holds the capacity for emotional and non-verbal information processing while the left-brain holds the capacity for language and logical processing. For the infant and young child, with no or limited language skills, communication happens primarily in the right brain. These experiences occur at the emotional level, not at the cognitive or "thinking" level.

Thus, the communication between the parent and child happens at a non-verbal level. **When the child gives signals to the parent, the child experiences the parent as predictable and manipulatable.** Infants and young children have this amazing ability to "manipulate" their caretakers. For example, the baby smiles at the parent, the parent smiles back. The baby has created this mirroring response from the parent. The parent will even talk a crazy language like, "Goo-goo-gaa-gaa" to the baby. No one else on this planet can get this parent to do such things.

The baby can also cry and become hyper-aroused, "manipulating" the caregiver to come over and pick her up. Babies even have this manipulation technique down so well that they can get their parents up from a dead sleep in the middle of the night to feed them. Money and bribes wouldn't even get many of us out of bed in the middle of the night!

Even more impressive, babies can get grown men, CEO's of mega-corporations, dressed in red power ties, to bend over and make silly noises and change their tone of voice to that of a little kid. The high-powered, influential board of directors of such a CEO doesn't even have that kind of power.

You've experienced this yourself. How many times have you walked by a baby, felt this force pulling you over to her, and then dropped everything you were doing to connect with the baby?

All kidding aside, this ability to "manipulate" is an important part of any child's development. **It is in this attachment system between the parent and the child that is helping the child regulate her states of stress and fear.** The parent who attends to the child's negative states is helping the child shift back into a positive state. This is known as "affect synchrony." Affect synchrony is the regulatory means for developing and maintaining positive emotional states within the relationship of emotional communication. Positive states are amplified and maximized for the child while negative states are minimized and neutralized for the child.

If your child missed early experiences of affect synchrony with you or with another caretaker, she will seek to have these experiences, even at an older age. Manipulation is simply an inherent way for her to achieve this goal. If you shift from seeing this as a negative and irritating behavior to a request for connection and healing, you will be able to meet her needs in a positive and loving way.

When you interact with her, see her through the lens of a child who is desperate to know connection and who needs to know what unconditional love is. **She needs to know that she is important enough to be able to move you, just like when the baby smiles and the parent smiles back. This gives her a sense of worth and "all-rightness."**

Be sure to read, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control*, for more practical ways of parenting out of love while maintaining boundaries and teaching her more effective ways to ask for help and connection (available at www.beyondconsequences.com).

And don't forget to spend time with her, simply playing with her. Playing with her and being with her can repair the missing pieces from her early history, at a physiological and emotional level. **You will also be creating the essential ingredient of life: Joy!** By amplifying the positive experiences in her life and by giving her a sense of safety and security in her relationship with you, even if temporary, the need to be manipulative will disappear.

Press on,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heather T. Forbes, LCSW

www.beyondconsequences.com

Parent and Author of *Beyond Consequences, Logic & Control: Volume 1 & Volume 2*, and *Dare to Love*