

## Tenet #8: Give Kids What They Need, Not What They Expect.

### The Deeper Cut:

Have you ever wondered why young children want to watch the same videos and read the same bedtime stories over and over again? Maybe it's because they can't remember what happened last time, and each repetition seems brand new all over again? Not likely.

It's because they can remember! Each time they see the same pictures and hear the same words, they feel a little more secure. "I knew that would happen!" they think excitedly. Because a young child's world is full of things they cannot understand or control, they are drawn to repeated, predictable experiences and routines. Predictability equals safety.


The need for predictability is so great that, for some kids, predictably bad may seem better than unpredictably good. In uncertain situations, trauma-exposed kids often strive to recreate a cycle of familiar failure, luring adults into playing the roles of abuser or abandoner. They test us with outlandish behaviors, expecting us to do what other adults have always done: lose their tempers and back out of their promises. And when we eventually do exactly that, they react with a sense of sad satisfaction: "See, I knew that would happen. That's why I never trust adults."

### Conflict Cycle

The Conflict Cycle model by Dr. Nicholas Long explains this cycle of self-fulfilling failure. Picture an unhappy child surrounded by dark storm clouds of self-doubt, prior trauma, and overwhelming stress. Unaware of this emotional maelstrom, we set out a lightning rod, such as a demand to complete their schoolwork, or

TACT2 Tenet #8

**Give kids what they need, not what they expect.**  
Don't validate their self-fulfilling prophecies of failure.



For some kids, predictable failure can seem better than unpredictable success. Abused or abandoned youth often lure adults into re-enacting familiar roles of Abuser or Abandoner. Surprise them by giving them the acceptance they need rather than the rejection they expect.

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criticism of their bad language. This small stress triggers a lightning strike, and the storm explodes.

The child is flooded with intense emotions such as betrayal, fury, guilt, shame — feelings that are completely out of proportion to the trigger. Unable to manage this surge of emotion, kids become overwhelmed and act out impulsively. Some lash out with angry curses, others shut down or run away in hysterical tears.

Their behavior is often so unexpected that adults react with anger or shock. "How dare you! Watch your language!" or "Get back here. Don't you run away from me!" Of course, our negative reaction causes the child even more stress, leading to more intense emotions, more escalated behaviors, and more punishment.

Minutes or hours later, the emotional storm has passed, but the wreckage remains. Relationships have been strained, trust damaged, and plans shattered.

Yet they also experience that sense of sad satisfaction that comes in the wake of a predictable failure: “See? I knew it. Sooner or later, they all let you down.”

## **Creating Coping Cycles**

How can we disarm this self-fulfilling prophesy of failure, resist the lure of their traps, and turn Conflict Cycles into Coping Cycles instead?

In the midst of an emotional thunderstorm, our best strategy lies in controlling our own reactions to their impulse behavior.

First, start by acknowledging your natural instinct to react emotionally rather than respond thoughtfully in threatening situations. Many of us are hard-wired to angrily fight fire with fire when insulted, or to anxiously avoid conflict when attacked. Unless the situation is imminently dangerous, step back a pace and take a deep breath. Give yourself a moment to process and label those angry or anxious feelings. For example: ‘Okay, THAT was unexpected! Gotta say, I’m feeling pretty angry about what just happened.’

Next, put it in perspective. Recognize that while you may have triggered the issue, you didn’t actually cause it. None of what just happened was personal. The more you know about your challenging children and what sets them off, the better you’ll be at seeing when their emotional behavior is a defensive reaction to their issues. For example: ‘I don’t know what’s going on here, but I guess I struck a nerve somehow. Wait! Didn’t his mom just get out of rehab? I’ll bet....’

Finally, when you are both calmer, approach the youngster with a tone of concern. Watch your tone and body language, and maintain enough space to avoid triggering their defenses.

Ask for a chance to talk. It’s always good to start with an apology. “Hey, I’m sorry that my comment upset you. I’m not sure exactly what’s going on, but I care about you, and I’d like to work this out. Can we talk?” Use some good active listening skills to encourage venting.

There’s no guarantee that the child will be open to processing with you even if you do everything right. Remember, according in their perspective, you’ve just insulted or humiliated them.

But your calm, compassionate response flies in the face of their negative expectations, and once their rational brain reasserts itself, they’ll likely acknowledge this (to themselves, at least). You won’t completely change their perspective, but each time you respond to their crises with calm concern rather than anger or anxiety, you build a case for an alternate belief system: “It’s true that most adults will let you down, but maybe not EVERY adult.”

Summary: Children need a sense of consistency and predictability to feel safe. Many of those who have been exposed to constant chaos and unpredictability through a lifetime of abuse and abandonment come to expect that sooner or later, all adults will disappoint them. When triggered, they may behave in ways that lure helping adults into the familiar roles of abuser or abandoner.

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