

# Controlling Behaviour (FREE ACCESS)

Written by Amber on 14th April 2013

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<http://www.pafca.co.uk/advice-strategy/controlling-behaviour/>

**Fostered and adopted children are often very controlling of their environments and the people within it. It's often tough to know how to approach the controlling behaviour or even why it exists other than to assume it is simply wilfulness and lack of boundaries.**

## Examples of controlling behaviour:

- Dominating play with other children;
- Parenting behaviour with other children and adults;
- Intolerance of parental control;
- Becoming upset, distressed and/or angry at having their control questioned e.g:
  - Not having a choice over what to eat;
  - Enforcement of bedtimes;
  - Extreme distress at hearing "no".

## Why do fostered and adopted children display controlling behaviour?

In order to understand the need of developmentally traumatised children to feel in control it is useful to reflect on, and reinterpret, our understanding of the behaviour of babies and toddlers. It is this emotional and relational stage that developmentally traumatised children are frequently stuck in (see [theory basics](#) articles).

Babies and toddlers are instinctively and relentlessly controlling of their parental figures. Parents of newborns sleep when the baby doesn't need them, eat if and when they get the time and shower when a brief gap in the need for childcare arises. Why are young children so controlling? The answer really is simple; they have to be! If they didn't do all of those things then they would not get all of their crucial emotional, physical and psychological

needs met. Babies have an unconscious, evolutionarily programmed knowledge of what they need to flourish, indeed to survive.

Yet we don't view this behaviour in babies as controlling. We generally view it as an expression of need and dependence. Babies do not develop beyond this behaviour from being explicitly taught or being disciplined out of their needs. When such needs have been satisfied by a period of them being predictably and consistently met, the child has a decreasing need to exert their control. Children's level of controlling behaviour gradually diminishes and throughout middle and later childhood the child is progressively able to meet more and more of their own needs.

Babies are instinctively controlling because if they weren't they simply wouldn't survive. Fascinating new scientific developments are revealing that this survival is not only due to babies' success in being fed and protected. Evidence is now emerging that attuned, sensitive interactions with parental figures shape brain development and a lack of it may even effect such primitive brain functions as the ability to regulate breathing and the swallow reflex (1). Babies can therefore be physically well looked after yet still be at risk of physical damage, quite apart from the psychological and emotional damage that may be caused.

So, if babies' behaviour is inherently controlling yet entirely acceptable and we understand that fostered and adopted children are invariably stalled emotionally and relationally in the baby stage then their controlling behaviour becomes entirely sensible, understandable and, in fact, necessary.

However, it's very difficult to understand and respond appropriately to this in children that aren't babies. It becomes incredibly challenging to empathise with the overwhelming neediness and consequent need to control of a child who can physically assert themselves, come up with attempts at verbal justifications of their "controlling" behaviour (which will inevitably be a defensive response to their own feelings of "badness" for their compulsion to control) and who is so obviously not a baby in a physical sense.

Another factor to consider when trying to understand the controlling behaviour of fostered and adopted children is the strategies which such children have had to develop in order to get some of their needs met by abusive or neglectful parents (see [Attachment Theory](#) page). Many neglected children have had to learn to control their attachment behaviour and responses to their parents in very careful (unconscious) ways in order to get some kind of care from them. This becomes ingrained as an attachment pattern, an implicit way of being that isn't known or understood, it simply *is*. Children subjected to active abuse in infancy often develop the very sensible, adaptive strategy of controlling their parents to protect themselves e.g. being smiley and happy to deter aggression.

Another very significant element is that children have often had to become responsible and therefore very controlling of their siblings in a clumsy, childlike way in order to protect them from violence or to protect themselves from unwanted adult aggression or other abuse.

# PAFCA's Controlling Behaviour Top 5 Tips

## STOP! – REFLECT – EMPATHISE – DO

(the tips for Attention-Seeking vs. Attachment-Seeking may also be useful)

### Top Tip 1

Notice your own reactions to feeling controlled. It may bring out feelings of powerlessness, anger, frustration etc. Think about these feelings as stemming from your child's early trauma rather than being your or your child's "fault". Try to talk through these feelings with someone you trust and deal with them outside of your interactions with your child. If you don't deal with these emotions in this way then they will inevitably influence how you deal with your child. It's all but impossible to be empathic and understand the cause of your child's controlling behaviour if you're angry about it.

### Top Tip 2

Approach your child's controlling behaviour as you would if they were a 12 month old. That is; give your child as much control as you can i.e. respond as much as you can, whilst maintaining a calm, assertive demeanour to create a feeling of safety for your child. Reward-punishment strategies won't help; babies don't learn to not need you via discipline and neither do developmentally traumatised children.

### Top Tip 3

Remember, your child's need for control is driven by a fear that if they don't control you or others they won't be looked after well enough or they may make themselves or siblings vulnerable. The desire to control comes from a sensible place.

### Top Tip 4

Allowing **Control**. (*Excerpt taken from Why Can't My Child Behave? Dr. Amber Elliott*). The aim of Allowing Control is for carers to actively give children control of as many things as they can whilst not allowing them to take responsibility for things that would be unfair and/or inappropriate. In the Allowing Control technique carers are also communicating to their child that they understand that their need for control has meant that they have had to take a great deal of responsibility too. Carers should share in the enjoyment of their child when the child successfully manages both of these challenges. Key points to remember when using the Allowing Control technique:

- Carers should make a big fuss about how well their child deals with the control and responsibility. Think of this as empathically sharing in their joy and success rather than praising them (praise derives from reward-punishment thinking and require evaluation of the child).
- Carer and child should work together to actively facilitate the child's safe control.
- It is useful for carers to work out what the details of the Allowing Control task will be before they give the control over to their child. Set them up to succeed.
- Carers should ensure that their child understands the details of what the task entails and give them the best chance of feeling good about being in control.

- It is important for carers to resist the temptation to take control back if the child struggles to manage the task that they have taken control of.

### **Top Tip 5**

There may be tasks that children want to have control over that would be harmful to them. For these activities carers may find Contained Control Useful. (*Excerpt taken from Why Can't My Child Behave? Dr. Amber Elliott*). **Contained Control** requires negotiation between carer and child, this should be done in a way that uses the child's high levels of responsibility and fosters their ability to make decisions. For any Contained Control activity the carer and child should make a chart together that specifies who will have control of which aspects. It is very important that the child has control of more aspects than the carer does, this can be done by drawing out lots of detailed elements of the task if need be. The child can decide on the order of the elements, the colour of the chart, the pictures that are used etc. Carers can actively defer to the child's decisions on these issues. The chart should then be printed and laminated. It is important for the carer to support their child in making sure that everyone else in the house pays attention to the chart.

Elliott, Amber (2013) *Why Can't My Child Behave? Empathic Parenting Strategies that Work for Adoptive and Foster Families* Jessica Kingsley Publishers