Why Do Children Resist or Obey Their Foster Parents?
The Inner Logic of Children's Behavior During Discipline

Elly Singer, Jeannette Doornenbal, and Krista Okma

This article discusses a study of children's perspectives on disciplinary conflicts with their foster parents. Most children accept parental authority, but they also defend their personal autonomy and loyalties to peers. In this study, only birthchildren told real-life stories about fierce resistance to get their own way. Fierce resistance among foster children was motivated by inner conflicts and confusion. Obedience among foster children often derived from fear of punishment or a feeling of impotence. The authors discuss the theoretical and pedagogical implications of these findings.
Researchers are aware that children in foster care have to develop survival skills to adapt to their unsafe environments (Henry, 1999; Rubin, 1996). Once they take into account that children in foster care have experienced some form of maltreatment or neglect in their birthfamilies and perhaps lived in uncertainty for years before finding a stable foster family arrangement, researchers and therapists see the children's resilience and flexibility (Triseliotis, Sellick, & Short, 1995; Weterings, 1998).

Of course, many children in foster care have problems with adjustment, behavior, and mental stability (McIntyre & Keesler, 1986; Price & Landsverk, 1998); however, a full appreciation of children's resilience goes further than registering percentages of foster children without problems. It implies a new understanding of children's psychological functioning from their own perspective. When abused or neglected children become part of a foster family, family members need to recognize their survival skills as providing important clues to their world, rather than as challenging behavior (Henry, 1999). As a contribution to this new approach, this article studies children's perspectives on conflicts with their foster parents.

**Studies of Child-Parent Conflicts**

Most studies of parent-child conflicts focus on the relative effectiveness of various parental strategies for gaining compliance, managing negative behaviors, and encouraging the internalization of moral rules (Baumrind, 1971; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Consequently, the literature includes less information on how children construe authority interactions and how they try to persuade their parents (Braine, Pomerantz, & Lorber, 1991; Verbeek, Hartup, & Collins, 2000).

In general, children consider it legitimate for parents to force their children to obey family rules because of their adult knowledge and their responsibility for bringing the child into the world, raising and taking care of the child, and providing for the child economically (Braine et al., 1991; Laupa, Turiel, & Cowan, 1995).
Even young children, however, think parental authority has limits. Inconsistent or unclear moral messages cause confusion in the child (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). According to children, a child has the right to disobey when the parent tries to involve a child in an immoral act or when a parent interferes in an area under the child’s personal jurisdiction, such as choosing one’s friends. Children’s views of personal freedom are socially constructed out of negotiations and conflicts with their parents (Killen & Nucci, 1995; Smetana, 1988). Children justify obedience on the basis of avoiding punishment (Laupa et al., 1995).

Retrospective studies of adults show that transgressive parental actions are quite common, such as divulging a child’s secrets, breaking a promise, or falsely accusing the child (Waksler, 1996). Conflicts about parental dishonesty tend to evoke strong emotions in the child. In Waksler’s (1996) study, some adults reported on how they distanced themselves from their parents, whereas others said they tried to pressure their parents by voicing their opinions and feelings until the conflict was settled.

Studies show that school-age children have well-developed skills to influence their parents at the psychological level. Their empathic skills enable them to take multiple cues into account in assessing their parents’ feelings during a conflict (Covell & Miles, 1992; Ricard & Kamberg-Kilicci, 1995). During late childhood, an enhanced perspective allows the child to imagine how an impartial third party would view the self and parent, which is called shared moral perspective (Selman & Demorest, 1984). In addition, school-age children can regulate their emotions (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989). They are well aware of the dangers of expressing anger in intimate relationships toward their parents or best friends (Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992). They invest much energy, therefore, in hiding their negative feelings and using various emotional responses to restore highly valued relationships (Rumbaugh Whitesell & Harter, 1996; Verbeek et al., 2000; Zeman & Shipman, 1997). The importance of a satisfying resolution is indicated by repeated findings that bilateral involvement in the termination of conflict is a better marker of adaptive, well-
functioning parent-child relationships than the occurrence of conflict (Verbeek et al., 2000; Waal, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

This study contributes to the understanding of children's perspectives of disciplinary conflicts by using an integrative approach: by studying the "inner logic" of children's behavior during conflicts with their parents. The researchers defined the inner logic of the child's behavior as the particular way a child understands his or her behavior and motivation in a specific situation. Moreover, the researchers focused especially on children in long-term foster care—that is, children who will probably never reunify with their birthparents. This section discusses the concept of inner logic. The study operationalized this concept and then examined potential relationships between the inner logic of children in foster care and their adverse life experiences.

Inner Logic

The concept of inner logic is based on current constructivist theories of the affective development of abused children. In the following, constructivist assumptions and insights that are most relevant for this study are discussed. Piaget, Vygotsky, and constructivist psychologists assumed that the urge to adapt actively to the environment is basic to human development (Emde, Biringer, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Confronted with new environments, a basic motive exists to "get it right." At a subjective level, this means that children as well as adults need to experience their own actions as logical and sound. Experiences that conflict with a person's inner logic lead to internal and social conflicts, which can lead to confusion and psychological problems, but these experiences also lead to negotiations and further the development of more positive and complex cognitive-affective structures.

Constructivist psychologists assume that thoughts, affects, and social behaviors form an indivisible whole in human behav-
ior. In line with Vygotsky and Piaget, they emphasize that all our activities, including our thinking, are motivated (Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1934/1987) and that all our emotions and moral affects assume cognitive processes signaling important interests are at stake (Frijda, 1986). This integration requires new theoretical concepts. In this study, the researchers use the concept of cognitive-affective structures, that is:

- those complex synthesizing structures that integrate cognition, in the form of appraisals, expectations, and beliefs;
- motivation, in the form of needs, interests, goals, and emotional action tendencies;
- affect, in the shape of physiological arousal and bodily feeling; and
- actions, in the form of motor responses, social procedures, and methods for acting (Miltenburg & Singer, 2000).

Another assumption of the constructivist approach is that cognitive-affective structures are based on a past history of experience of particular individuals in particular contexts. Children who are continuously well cared for by loving parents develop the basic assumptions that they can trust their parents and that their self has worth. Children who are abused, neglected, or abandoned may develop a deep belief that they cannot depend on their parents and that their self is worthless (Fischer & Ayoub, 1994; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). These assumptions or beliefs are embedded in children’s daily activities, routines, and procedural knowledge of interaction with their parents (Emde et al., 1991; Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990). Specific procedures are often automatically evoked in the child by specific situations. In abused and neglected children, both their assumptions and their patterns of interaction can be related to survival. They often have to develop extraordinary strategies for emotional self-regulation, such as resorting to dissociation, self-hypnosis, emotional detachment, or ritualized patterns of behavior (Henry, 1999; Miltenburg & Singer, 1999, 2000).

Because the inner logic of the child’s behavior reflects underlying cognitive-affective structures, the researchers have
operationalized the inner logic of a child's behavior as the (un)conscious associations of the child among his or her actions, the pursued goals, the underlying interests, the aroused emotions, and emotion regulation. This study reconstructed children's inner logic by analyzing their narratives evoked by a specially designed interview method.

**Expectancies**

Researchers have performed few studies of foster children's views of their conflicts with parents. Therefore, no specific a priori hypotheses exist regarding the differences between the inner logic of birthchildren and children in foster care. On the basis of past research, however, it seems reasonable to expect the following two differences.

Studies of the foster child–foster parent relationship show that children in long-term care develop a sense of belonging to the foster parents and that they also tend to entrust their current concerns and worries to their foster parents (Gardner, 1996; Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1995; McAuley, 1996). Most children in foster care also show ambivalence, however: They rate their emotional involvement with their foster parents relatively low (Bastiaensen, 2001) and choose to keep the details of their earlier life private (McAuley, 1996). On the basis of these findings, the researchers predicted that children in foster care invest in the maintenance of a good relationship with their foster parents, just as birthchildren with their parents. They also expected, however, that more foster children would try to achieve this by distancing themselves from their foster parents during conflicts, whereas more birthchildren heighten their involvement during conflicts to find a mutually satisfying resolution.

Another prediction of this study refers to the fierceness of the emotions evoked during conflicts with foster parents. Anxiety and fear can easily be triggered in children in foster care by minor incidents (Briere, 1992; Howe, 1995). They tend to interpret other people's behavior more negatively, and, correspondingly,
to act more aggressively than birthchildren, especially in relation to peers (Price & Landsverk, 1998). This intemperance can be related to their earlier experiences of abuse and abandonment, but also to recent experiences of being a “secondhand child” in the foster family (Beek, 2001; Butler & Charles, 1999). The researchers expect that minor conflicts can trigger more violent emotions in foster children than in birthchildren and that more children in foster care act aggressively during conflicts with their foster parents.

Method

Participants

The research group consisted of 45 children in long-term foster care and 48 birthchildren, all between 8 and 13 years old. The researchers recruited the foster children with the help of five regional organizations for the counseling of foster care families in the northern (Groningen and Leeuwarden) and western (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague and Utrecht) parts of Netherland. These organizations informed the foster parents and children in the age group about the research. If the child wanted to participate and the foster parents and other involved authorities gave permission, the foster parents contacted the researchers to make an appointment for an interview at their home. The authors have no systematic information about why foster children refused or were not permitted to participate in the research.

The researchers recruited birthchildren from six primary schools. They asked teachers to give parents and children a letter about the study. The researchers selected the birthchildren to match with the children in foster care for gender, age, and socio-economic background (see Table 1). The foster children had significantly more birthparents with migrant backgrounds, but most of them lived in a native Dutch foster family.

Because this research group was rather small, the results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the authors assume that the results are telling, because the research group was well balanced and sufficiently diverse.
## Table 1
Characteristics of the Participants (*N* = 93)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Birthchildren&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Foster Children&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>13 (30)</td>
<td>10 (22)</td>
<td>23 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>15 (31)</td>
<td>18 (40)</td>
<td>33 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>15 (31)</td>
<td>16 (36)</td>
<td>31 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Dutch</td>
<td>43 (90)</td>
<td>26 (58)</td>
<td>69 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>5 (10)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>18 (39)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>23 (25)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23 (48)</td>
<td>27 (60)</td>
<td>50 (54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 (52)</td>
<td>18 (40)</td>
<td>43 (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8–10 years</td>
<td>27 (56)</td>
<td>21 (47)</td>
<td>48 (52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–13 years</td>
<td>24 (53)</td>
<td>21 (44)</td>
<td>45 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>48 (100)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>31 (68)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>79 (85)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14 (31)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>14 (15)&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Behavior Checklist–Clinical</strong></td>
<td>9 (19)</td>
<td>12 (27)</td>
<td>21 (23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> *n* = 48.
<sup>b</sup> *n* = 45.

*<sup>*</sup>* *p* < 0.5 according to *χ²*.

### Characteristics of the Foster Children

The researchers gathered background information about the children in the research group by asking the foster parents to fill in a written questionnaire and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Most of the children in care were placed out of home at a relatively young age (the mean age for the girls was 1 year, 8 months; for boys, 3 years) because their birthparents could not take adequate care of them. The reasons most frequently cited for placement were inadequate and abusive methods of dis-
cipline (49%), emotional neglect (31%), physical neglect (24%), and parental problems of drug addiction (22%; see Table 2).

Three-quarters of the children in care had lived with one or two foster families; a quarter lived at three or more addresses or, in a few cases, in a residential setting. Of the children, 80% had lived with their recent foster family for two years or longer. Although the Dutch foster care system officially has no policy of permanent placement, almost all foster parents expected their foster children to stay in their family until the foster child’s 18th birthday. Most of the children had monthly or bimonthly contact with at least one of their birthparents; seven children (15%) had no contacts with their birthfamily.

At the beginning of the interview, the researchers asked the children to make a relationship diagram by putting stylized wooden dolls (female and male dolls of different sizes, and figures of pets) on a white square board with three concentric, colored circles. The children were to put the people or pets they were most close to—those who they miss or would miss very much—in the red inner circle. Other people or pets they were fond of but who were not missed during their absence could be placed in the orange (middle circle), and the yellow outer circle was for people they just liked to play with or meet occasionally. This instrument measures the perceived emotional closeness of the child to others. It was developed and is much used in the Netherlands for diagnosing children in foster care, but no one has done research to validate it (Weterings, Bloemberg, Pruijs, & Pool, 1995). Of the foster children, 73% placed one of their foster parents in the inner circle, 41% their birthparents, and 29% both their foster parents and their birthparents. A minority of the children (13%) placed neither their foster parents nor their birthparents in the inner circle.

The study found two indications of problem behavior in the children. The researchers asked parents what type of school their foster children attended. Of the 45 foster children, 14 (31%) attended a school for special education; none of the birthchildren did. The researchers also asked the foster parents to fill in
### Table 2
Reasons for Placement in Out-of-Home Care ($N = 45$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Placement</th>
<th>Girls (n = 27)</th>
<th>Boys (n = 18)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate/abusive discipline</td>
<td>11 (41)</td>
<td>11 (61)</td>
<td>22 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
<td>9 (33)</td>
<td>5 (28)</td>
<td>14 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>5 (28)</td>
<td>11 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug addiction</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>4 (22)</td>
<td>10 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
<td>4 (22)</td>
<td>8 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical neglect</td>
<td>5 (18)</td>
<td>3 (17)</td>
<td>8 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatric problems</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
<td>2 (11)</td>
<td>3 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
<td>4 (22)</td>
<td>7 (16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Achenbach’s (1991) CBCL. According to the CBCL scores, the children in foster care had comparatively slightly more behavioral problems than did the birthchildren.

Most of the children in foster care in this study, therefore, experienced neglect or abuse in their early years, and a minority experienced several separations because of replacements. During the last two years, however, almost all had lived in a relatively stable family arrangement.

### Interview Instrument

To investigate the children’s inner logic, the authors developed a semistructured interview. During the interview, they discussed three types of conflicts: a disciplinary situation, a crisis of confidence, and a situation involving false accusation. First, the researchers talked about these conflicts on the basis of fictitious situations. Subsequently, they asked the children if they had ever experienced such a situation in real life. For both the fictitious and the real-life situations, the authors posed concrete questions, helping the children explore their inner logic. On the basis of the operationalization of inner logic, they asked questions about the children’s actions, children’s goals, the interests motivating their behavior, their emotions, what interests had triggered these emo-
tions, how the emotions were regulated externally and internally, and at what they were aimed.

The authors used props to gain and hold the children’s attention and to engage them in the task: a story and picture of a fictitious situation, a thermometer with which the child could indicate the degree of severity, emotion faces, and a stop sign to indicate that they did not wish to answer a question or wanted to stop the interview. To support the children in telling their real-life stories without using leading questions, the authors used simple drawings to symbolize “Where was it?”, “Who was there?”, “What happened?”, and “What did you do? think? and feel?” (Garbarino & Scott, 1989; Greca, 1990).

Six female interviewers (two graduates in developmental psychology and four graduate students in pedagogy or psychology) got a two-day training especially focused on the interview instrument. The researchers supervised the interviewers during every other and, later, every fourth interview; they also discussed transcripts of their interviews. All interviews took place at the child’s home, without the foster parents present. Most interviews took about one and a half hours. Some interviews took longer because of pauses in which children liked to show off their treasures, play soccer, or chat and relax. Most children liked the interview—the stop sign was only playfully used by a few foster children to test the interviewer, as if they were asking, “Do I really have the power to stop the interview?”

Analysis

The researchers started the data analyses by developing a category system to analyze separately the elements of which the children’s inner logic was composed, that is, actions, goals, concerns, and emotions. To develop categories of actions, they used earlier research on children’s strategies for coping (Band, Brotman, & Weisz, 1988; Rybski-Beaver, 1997). They distinguished parent-related actions, such as enforcing, whining, deceiving, arguing...
or asking why, communicating emotions, and going away, and self-related actions, such as letting themselves go alone, worrying, using cognitive restructuring, and diverting themselves.

The goal categories were based on Selman and Demorest’s (1984) theory of levels of negotiation strategies. Characteristic of a low level of negotiation is that the child uses a unilateral goal perspective; the child either tries to rescue himself or herself by conforming or masking behavior (unilateral–self-saving), or he or she tries to enforce his or her will on the other person (unilateral–coercive). At a medium level of negotiation, the child tries to find a compromise between his or her wishes and the other person (reciprocal–influential). At a high level of negotiation, the child tries to find a mutual solution based on shared concerns, values, and norms (collaborative–mutual goals).

With regard to concerns, the authors distinguished among moral, social, and personal concerns. They categorized emotions per distinct emotion (anger, sadness, guilt, shame, confusion, etc.) in an expressed or hidden emotion. They altered and adjusted these categories while analyzing the interview material. After the coding process, the researchers transposed these data in a numerical system for the purpose of statistical analyses. They used Cohen’s kappa (Wickens, 1989) to determine the interrater reliability for the main variables. The test results were satisfying: actions, 0.80; goals, 0.71; emotions, 0.96; emotion regulation, 0.82; and profiles, 0.83. The authors statistically computed the differences between birth- and foster children and between boys and girls in the separate main categories.

The authors also focused on the relationships between the separate main categories at the level of the specific stories to reconstruct the child’s inner logic in a specific conflict situations, such as the connections the child made among his or her actions, goals, concerns, emotions, and emotion regulation. The researchers constructed profiles for groups of children who shared a similar inner logic using the following procedure.
The first step was based on the main category of action. The authors distinguished three groups of children who used different categories of parent-related acts:

- fierce resistance: enforcing, strong whining behavior, and deceiving;
- moderate resistance: arguing or asking why and communicating emotions; and
- no resistance: no or very weak attempts to persuade the parent without communication of emotions.

Second, in these three groups, the authors examined the goals the children wanted to obtain through their behavior, their underlying motives, and their emotions. The third step was to formulate hypotheses about the children's expectancies about their foster parents and their own self-worth: Were they mainly positive, mainly negative, or ambivalent and confused? Finally, the authors computed the differences between the foster and birthchildren with regard to the profiles of inner logic.

Findings

The authors restricted themselves to analyzing the children's stories about a disciplinary conflict. In the fictitious situation, they introduced Maarten (for boys) and Merel (for girls). The child asks his or her father if he or she may watch a television program that other children are allowed to see. The father refuses. The researchers did not find any significant differences between the foster and birthchildren in the main categories for the fictitious situation. In the real-life stories, however, several differences emerged. In the fictitious situation, about as many foster children as birthchildren rebelled against their parents to get their own way by enforcing or concealing acts. Most foster children, however, stopped mentioning rebellious behavior in their real-life stories. Significantly more foster children than birthchildren said that in real life, they try to hide their anger from their par-
ents, and significantly fewer foster children tried to induce empathy in their parents by communicating their anger or sadness (see Table 3).

By analyzing the children's inner logic, that is, the relationships between the main categories in a specific story about a real-life experience, the authors arrived at a more differentiated, vivid picture of the children's motives.

**Five Profiles of Children's Inner Logic in a Real-Life Disciplinary Situation**

The researchers constructed five profiles varying in the degree of resistant behavior (fierce, moderate, or none), in the underlying motives (goals, interests, and emotions), and in the expectancies about parents and children's self-worth (positive, negative, or ambivalent/confused). Because eight children did not recount any real-life story of disciplinary conflict, the research group consists of 85 children (see Table 4).

**Fierce Resistance to Get One's Way**

Children in Profile 1 reason as follows: "When I put pressure on my parents, I have a good chance of winning." They have unilateral-coercive goals: to get their own way—for instance, to get an expensive birthday party, new clothes, playtime outside after dinner, or permission to watch a late TV program. The most frequently mentioned interests were personal (because I like it, want it, have the right to make my own decisions), social (togetherness with other kids), and moral (equal treatment with other kids).

The children freely expressed their anger as means of applying pressure. A telling example is the story of Jeroen, an 11-year-old boy living with his own parents. Jeroen's mother turned down his request to play a laser game with his friends at his birthday party. But for Jeroen, important interests were at stake: The laser game is cool, and other kids were allowed to. He, therefore, continued pushing his parents:

I got red and a bit rude and went to my room stamping my feet...by sitting in my room for three hours, playing
### Table 3

Summary of the Significant Differences Between Birth- and Foster Children in the Main Categories in the Real-Life Stories About a Disciplinary Conflict (*N* = 83)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Foster Children (n = 41)</th>
<th>Birthchildren (n = 44)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Enforcing</td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
<td>16 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Communicating emotions</td>
<td>19 (46)</td>
<td>30 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: Self-saving</td>
<td>23 (56)</td>
<td>6 (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p* < 0.5 according to χ².

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music very loudly. I wanted to get their attention, so they’d feel pity for me and would say yes in the end.

Jeroen did not succeed. Instead of pity, he got a fire-and-brimstone sermon, but this did not make him rethink his strategy:

[Next time] I think I must tackle it harder, keep nagging and go on with it till they give in. Then I will say, “You don’t have say over me, you’re not the boss. I am allowed to set my own rules.”

These children were not afraid to damage their relationship with their parents. On the contrary, a boy like Jeroen even thinks that his anger can move his parents to give in because they pity him. The researchers suggest that these children base their behavior on strong positive assumptions about their parents’ love and their own self-worth. Although their stories show that they are not always successful, these children seem convinced that in a disciplinary conflict, they have a great chance of winning for little risk. Only one of the foster children fit into this profile (see Table 4), whereas 15 birthchildren (34%) evinced this inner logic.

**Fierce Resistance Related to Inner Conflicts and Confusion**

Like the children in Profile 1, the children of Profile 2 resist their parents’ decisions. They are confused, however, by their own, often fierce behavior or by their conflicting emotions and concerns. They also pursue unilateral goals, not only to get their own
TABLE 4
Profiles of Inner Logic in a Disciplinary Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Foster Children</th>
<th>Birthchildren</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Fierce resistance to get one's own way</td>
<td>1 (2)*</td>
<td>15 (34)*</td>
<td>16 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fierce resistance due to inner conflict</td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
<td>3 (7)</td>
<td>9 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and confusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moderate resistance to persuade</td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
<td>3 (7)</td>
<td>9 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Minimal resistance and acceptance of</td>
<td>6 (15)</td>
<td>5 (11)</td>
<td>11 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the parent's authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Minimal resistance, fear of punishment,</td>
<td>8 (20)</td>
<td>11 (25)</td>
<td>19 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and defeatism</td>
<td>20 (49)*</td>
<td>4 (9)*</td>
<td>24 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Other</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6 (14)</td>
<td>6 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41 (100)</td>
<td>44 (100)</td>
<td>85 (100)</td>
</tr>
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*p < 0.5 according to χ².

way, but mainly in an attempt to save themselves. For these children, saving themselves means, for instance, that they acted in an aggressive way to avoid being overwhelmed by sadness or to preserve their feelings of self-worth. The emotions they mentioned are characteristic: Besides anger and sadness, they reported anxiety, guilt, shame, and confusion. Some of them cannot control their emotions, whereas most children have well-developed systems for the internal regulation of their emotions: Their externalizing and internalizing behavior go together.

The authors found nine children with this profile (11% of the whole group): six children in foster care (15%) and three birthchildren (7%). Two of the birthchildren felt confusion related to loyalty problems over their divorced parents. One birthchild felt powerless because his parents failed to keep their promises. This made him fly into terrible tempers. One foster child got confused when ridiculed by her foster mother, and four foster children told the interviewers that a prohibition by their foster parents could trigger such violent emotions that they could not stop themselves from nagging, lying, or destroying things. Several of these children said they hid their sadness by turning it into anger. Liza, an 11-year-old foster child, is an example of this type of child. The
following extended fragment of her interview shows the complexity of her inner logic:

Liza, being the youngest, must go to bed earliest. Once, when she got out of bed, she found the family together having chips and soda. She wanted to join them and have a cookie too, but her mother refused because she had already brushed her teeth.

Interviewer: What did you do?

Liza: When I'm not getting very angry, I ask over and over again: Why don't I get a cookie like the others? At the end, I left the room without saying goodnight. But when I got very, very angry, then I smashed the door and stamped up stairs. I hoped it would wake up one of the babies and make them cry. When my mother or father comes to my room, I try not to talk to them because I'm very angry.

I: You don't want to say a word. What do you want to achieve with that?

L: Because I'm angry and I've made myself a promise. Then I think to myself: Why haven't I slapped them in the face? But I don't have the courage. I find them so stupid! I'm glad they're not my real parents. I will never talk to them again. That's what I'm thinking then.

I: And is that what you do?

L: No. My mother can't sleep when I'm angry, so she always comes to me. In the end, we talk to each other and then it's over.

I: Is it important for you that your mother knows that you are angry?

L: Yes. Then I hope they get angry with me so I can show them: “You see, you never loved me anyway!...”
I: What made you feel sad?

L: As if I missed out. Then I start thinking and making up stories, and it [my sadness] just enters into all my stories.

I: Do you show your sadness?

L: No. That's childish. They will laugh at me, as if I am disowned.

I: What do you do with your feeling of sadness inside?

L: I repress it. I go upstairs and burst out. When someone comes upstairs, I pretend I'm playing. But mostly I get angry when I am sad. Then I start yelling, "Stupid thingummy cunt mother."

I: Does that help you?

L: Yes. I get rid of my aggression and feel relieved.

On the basis of Liza’s story, we can reconstruct her unconscious inner logic: “When I am thwarted, my feelings that I am unwelcome and unloved are confirmed. This hurts very much, often too much.” Expressing her pain in anger has several advantages. Angry thoughts soften the pain:

I don’t want my parents anyway, and she isn’t even my real mother. When I succeed in making my parents angry, I can show them that I am right: They don’t love me, and then I cease to feel confused.

And on top of this, by acting out my anger I can manipulate my mother. I have my parents in my power. My mother does everything to repair our relationship and I feel loved.

The children of the second profile act fiercely against their parents, but their behavior is not connected with positive assumptions about their parents' love or with high self-esteem. On the contrary, it is connected with unresolved inner conflicts and their doubt about their parents' love and their own self-worth.
Using Moderate Resistance to Persuade the Parent
Children of Profile 3 think, "I want to have my own way, but I don't want to make my mother or father cross, because it is so much nicer to be friends; therefore, I try to persuade them without making them angry with me." These children have a reciprocal-influential goal: They try to persuade their parents without jeopardizing the relationship. If they do feel ashamed or guilty, it is toward their peers, either because they feel humiliated or have to break their promises. Their use of several means of persuasion is characteristic: asking why, showing a little anger or sadness, or retreating from the situation in which they are becoming impudent. When they are not successful, they seek distraction, put what they want into perspective, pretend that it is not very important, or express their anger or sadness on their own. In disciplinary situations, they often struggle between their interests in autonomy and their bond with their parents on one hand, and their interest in not spoiling relations at home on the other.

Marc, a boy living with his birthparents, visited a shop with his mother in which the most beautiful go-karts (children's race cars) were sold. For a long time, he had wanted a go-kart. Then another boy came in asking his mother for a go-kart, and, to his utter amazement, the boy's mother agreed. Marc reported that he thought, "Why can he and not I? So I asked my mom, 'May I have that too?' My mom said no, it was impossible to have such a thing on the farm."

Marc tried to persuade his mother with arguments, got a little angry, and started to drive in a show go-kart. His mother then became cross, and he gave up. Marc said:

My mother was in a bad temper and because I kept on nagging, she wouldn't give in anyway. But my mother always feels sorry for me, so maybe I'll get it another time. When I have worked very hard, for example.

He tried to hide his resentment toward the boy who had just gotten the new go-kart by walking around and thinking, "I'll get him. When I have my own, his will already be old and ugly and
then I’ll have a brand new one.” Marc controlled his anger toward his mother by not giving up all hope and by making new plans to win her over.

Profile 3 children are well aware of their loving relationship with their parents, and on that basis, the rule of giving and taking. At the same time, they strive for more autonomy. In these little conflicts, they test parental limits and the ways they can gain more independence. The researchers found this profile in 11% of the birthchildren and 6% of the children in foster care.

Minimal Resistance and Acceptance of Parental Authority
Profile 4 consists of children who scarcely put up any resistance at all. They accept parental authority with little argument. Sometimes they ask why a request is not allowed, but once the parent has explained the decision, the child simply continues with his or her life. Some of these children have a reciprocal-influential goal, and some a collaborative-mutual goal. Their parents’ refusal hardly arouses any emotional reaction; all say they feel as usual, sometimes with a little sadness or anger. Children with a collaborative-mutual goal explain that their obedience has a moral interest. For instance, a girl relates that her mother has the right to demand obedience, otherwise she would not have a mother to protect her. Other children cite the Golden Rule: Their mother takes good care of them and, therefore, they ought to be a good child.

For example, when Alice’s mother refused her foster daughter permission to go with her girlfriend to a disco for children in the village, she asked her mother why not. Once her mother had explained the underlying reasons (she was afraid her daughter would hang around with the boys), Alice resigned herself, even though she wanted to go very badly and found it unfair because it was expressly a disco for children. But she didn’t want to argue or nag, because “I don’t like it when she acts like that to me, so I don’t do it to her.” She only showed a little anger “because I’m sure that I would not be allowed if I got angry. And besides, [my parents] treat me kind [sic], so I also treat them kind.”
These children do not or minimally resist parental decisions, because they consider it their moral duty to treat their parents with respect. They accept parental power. These children have the power over themselves to control any feelings of sadness or anger caused by the disappointment. The researchers found this profile in 25% of the birthchildren and 20% of the children in care.

**Minimal Resistance, Fear of Punishment, and Defeatism**

Profile 5 consists of children, like those in Profile 4, who do not resist their parents’ negative decisions; however, they differ in their underlying motives. Their main goal is unilateral-self-saving: to save themselves or their self-respect. Their main interests are fear of punishment and a feeling of powerlessness. These children say that they feel as usual. If they combine this “normal” feeling with anger or sadness, they mostly try to hide these feelings. The authors characterize this profile as *defeatism*.

First, the children give in immediately for fear of the consequences of any rebellious behavior. They are afraid their anger will provoke parental anger or contempt. Hans, a foster child, told us he was very disappointed when his mother forbade him to go to summer camp. It seemed so nice to him to be a “part of a group lying in your sleeping bag.” He asked why he was not allowed, but his mother merely stuck to her answer. He resigned himself to her decision, although he felt angry and sad. He felt it was better not to show it: “I’d better keep it quiet inside” for fear “they [would think I was]...a baby.”

Or take Nick, also a child in care, who wanted to play football with his friends. When his foster mother refused, he dropped the matter: “Oh well, too bad. If you start whining, you only get trouble, a row. And I don’t like to be punished.” Nick kept smiling although he felt sad and angry, but said, “I don’t do anything at all. I don’t know what to do. I’m afraid of getting into [a] quarrel.”

Second, the children included in this profile feel they are powerless to change their parents’ thinking. Their conclusion is that no remains no. Nicole, for example, wanted a bag of chips to take
to the swimming pool, so that she could offer these to her friends. Unfortunately, her foster mother only gave her a small bag, which aroused feelings of shame and guilt in front of her friends, and anger toward her mother. She tried to change her mother's decision a little by asking her why she could not have a bigger bag and by pulling an angry face, but she gave up: "I cannot change my mother’s mind. The next time I won’t even ask; she won’t let me anyway.” She controlled her emotions on her own by cursing in her own room and jumping on her bed very hard.

We have seen that these children are good at controlling fierce emotions of anger and sadness. Although they can be very disappointed by the refusal, they utter these feelings on their own and seek other distractions. Some of them use self-hypnosis or ritual body movements, or suffer from bellyache until their foster mother comes to console them. We reconstructed this profile in 49% of the foster children’s stories and in 9% of birthchildren’s stories.

Summary

The authors found two significant differences between foster children and birthchildren. One-third of the birthchildren (34%) defended their personal rights by fiercely resisting their parents’ authority. These children acted as if they could never destroy their relationship with their parents. The foster children, on the contrary, fiercely resisted their foster parents’ refusal because they were confused and driven by inner conflicts (15%; Profile 2). These children seemed far from convinced of their parents’ love and acceptance. But most of the foster children (Profile 5, 49%) did not dare resist their foster parents’ decisions.

Many children in foster care also seemed capable of building a relationship in which they could cope with a disciplinary conflict without anxiety or inner conflicts. A third of both the foster children and birthchildren claimed to obey their parents or to show moderate resistance to see if they could get their own way.
Discussion

The researchers' approach of integrating the child's account of behavioral, cognitive, and affective (actions, goals, concerns, and emotions) aspects of his or her functioning during conflict with a foster parent turned out to be fruitful. By focusing on the inner logic of children, they discovered that identical overt behaviors can be steered by different cognitive-affective structures.

The use of both fictitious and real-life stories also proved rewarding. In the two situations, different goals and interests were at stake. In the case of a disciplinary conflict, the children's fictitious stories tended to be dominated by their demand for autonomy, whereas the real-life stories more clearly reflected their feelings of dependence on their parents and the relational complexities of everyday life. This finding is consistent with a study by Walker, Pitts, Hennig, and Matsuba (1995) of adults who tended to attach more importance to relational dependencies in their real stories about moral problems than in their fictitious stories.

This study supports earlier studies that school-age children generally accept parental authority, but also negotiate to defend their personal autonomy and loyalties with peers (Killen & Nucci, 1995; Laupa et al., 1995). During conflicts, most of the children in this study were highly motivated to avoid any argument with their foster parents; this is also in line with earlier research (Verbeek et al., 2000). Birthchildren and children in foster care did not differ in this respect.

Consistent with the authors' expectations, they found that most foster children distance themselves from their foster parents during a disciplinary conflict in real-life situations. Many birthchildren, on the contrary, intensify their involvement with their parents to get their own way or compromise. This difference seems to reflect the birthchildren's positive assumptions about their parents, that their parents are moved by their anger and sadness and can be persuaded—assumptions that most foster
Children seem to lack. Children in foster care hold their anger back, and the researchers interpret this as a form of survival behavior.

Second, the authors expected to find a difference in the fierceness of emotions evoked during conflicts with parents with regard to more intemperance in foster children. In this study, however, a disciplinary conflict seemed to arouse more violent emotions in birthchildren than in foster children. The authors had not foreseen all the birthchildren who deliberately expressed their anger to defend their own rights.

This finding, however, should not blind us to a minority of the foster children who did show violent resistance and emotions. In these children, current, minor conflicts with their foster parents were probably affected by unresolved conflicts. We could reconstruct these children’s vital interests and why they persisted in behaving badly even when they knew that they were spoiling a highly appreciated relationship. Some children were so confused because of moral conflicts or contradictory demands of the foster parents that they could hardly control their emotions. Other children survived by turning their overwhelming sadness at the idea of being abandoned and unloved into anger.

**Pedagogical Consequences**

This study shows that children 8 years and older are able to verbalize the inner logic of their behavior with the help of a sympathetic adult who puts questions about their behavior, goals, concerns, and emotions at a concrete level. Most children enjoyed exploring and explaining themselves. The researchers think that this kind of interview (or talks with parents or other important adults) meet the preadolescent child’s need to gain insight into their own psychological functioning. In this study, the authors found that this need of support in gaining self-insight especially holds for the children with inner conflicts. Supported by the interviewers’ questions, they could exactly explain their psychological functioning in a specific situation; that is an important step toward the development of a self-concept at a metacognitive
level. The development of self-reflection at this age opens up new possibilities for empowerment of the child: the development of new cognitive skills for self control and the motivation to learn these new skills because they are consciously connected to their own goals and concerns, and to a shared insight into the inner logic of their behavior in a specific, troubling situation. At the moment, the authors are working to adapt this interview method for a counseling practice.

The profiles for foster children in this study raise suggestions for appropriate support, especially for the confused and defeatist children (Profiles 2 and 5). Compared with the confused foster children with externalizing behavior, the defeatist and powerless children do not easily attract parental attention. Foster parents and educators should be aware of this risk. Although these children value harmony in the foster parent-child relationship highly, they do not experience the opportunity to learn from conflicts. Testing the reliability of new relationships during conflicts is an opportunity to revise negative assumptions based on earlier experiences (Howe, 1995). Besides that, the child who tries to hide his or her feelings is easily misunderstood as detached or emotionally flat. Foster parents should be aware that hiding emotions can be a sign of bonding.

The authors came to understand that these children need help to plan ways of resisting their foster parents and defending their interests without jeopardizing their vital interest: to preserve the harmony in the parent-child relationship. A good friend, an empathic guardian, or a godparent might be helpful, that is, a person to whom they can safely express their anger, sadness, and anxiety and with whom they can discuss strategies for beginning or handling conflict without quarreling. They also have to learn the art of reconciliation after a fight.

With respect to the children who fiercely resist and are driven by inner conflicts, this study has shown that this intemperance evokes in children feelings of confusion and guilt toward their foster parents; they feel bad and worthless. Butler and Charles
found a relation between this kind of feeling and placement breakdown. Children who have experienced a breakdown often reason as follows: “My foster parents have the right to send me away because I am bad. My foster parents are bad because I knew from the beginning that they would not love me. I am and always will be second best, so they send me away.

Anger, fights, and punishment by the foster parents only aggravate the child’s inner conflicts and confusion. This confusion in turn increases his or her fear of being rejected or replaced again. This fear is real. After persistent conflicts, foster parents may decide to send the child away, either because of exhaustion and feelings of powerlessness, or because their first loyalty lies with their own family and children. The children need support both to understand how their rebellious behavior is provoked and to sort out moral, social, and personal dilemmas that cause confusion.

Many children in foster care need practical methods to solve their how-to-do-it questions: What can I do when I am confused? How can I resist without losing control and without making my foster parents too angry? How can I know that I can trust my foster parents? (Henry, 1999; Miltenburg & Singer, 1999, 2000). We have learned that the children can show us the way. Most children have already developed strategies and skills in other contexts that can be transferred to new situations. Sometimes they need support to talk with their teachers or foster parents. Take, for instance, the boy whose main strategy to stop his fits of anger was to withdraw from the situation. He explained to the interviewer that withdrawal was not allowed during the lessons at school. Maybe he and his foster parents can explain his problem to his teacher and together find a mutually acceptable solution. Or take the example of the girl who tried to hide her overwhelming sadness and whose main strategy to get comfort was to cry and ask for attention for all her little pains, while her foster parent hated her sulking behavior. These children need someone who helps them communicate their wishes and emotions and make plans for new strategies without jeopardizing their good
relationship with their foster parents and their interests related to survival.

References


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