

TFCO for Adolescents

Treatment Foster Care Oregon for Adolescents

Skills Coach Manual

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TFCO Overview

Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO) is an alternative to group care that provides intensive and comprehensive individualized treatment, support, and supervision in a family setting to youth with behavioral or emotional problems.

The goals of the program are to:

- Increase prosocial behaviors and decrease problem behaviors
- Provide close supervision and limit access to peers who lack effective social skills
- Specify and follow through on clear, consistent rules, limits, and consequences for rule violations
- Teach the youth new skills for forming relationships with positive peers and adults and for succeeding at school/work
- Enhance parenting skills and decrease conflict in the family

To accomplish these goals, the TFCO program uses a team approach to treatment. The Team Lead is the leader of the team. The Team Lead coordinates, supervises, and individualizes the youth's treatment plan. The Team Lead oversees the activities of the other members of the treatment team, including the skills coaches. The other members are:

- **Foster Parents.** Foster parents are the primary change agents. They help Team Leads identify target behaviors and formulate treatment plans. Their primary role is to implement the youth's program and to encourage and support the youth.
- **Individual Therapist.** The individual therapist supports the youth's adjustment in the program and acts as the youth's advocate. The therapist focuses on identifying strengths and building upon them to develop new prosocial skills and coping strategies.
- **Family Therapist.** The family therapist works with the youth's biological family (or other identified aftercare resource) to prepare them for the youth's return. The family therapist focuses on enhancing parenting strategies that will maintain and support youths' success when they return home.
- **Skills Coach.** The skills coach supports youths' adjustment and success, but in a different context from the individual therapist. Skills coaches focus on helping youth learn and use skills that are necessary to get along with peers and adults in a variety of settings.
- **PDR Caller.** The Parent Daily Report (PDR) caller has daily contact with the foster parent to get a checklist-type report of the youth's behavior. This report is used to individualize the treatment program.
- **Referring Agency.** Depending on individual situations, the referring agency may be child welfare, the juvenile court, or parole/probation. In many cases, the agency's representative is involved in the treatment plan and acts as a supportive agent to the overall goals of the plan.

Key features of the TFCO program include:

- Only one youth is placed in a foster home at a time. This prevents the youth from associating with other youth who have problems, as is often the case in group residential care.
- A team approach is used to implement the treatment plan with clear role definition among team members. This approach allows all participants (youth, family, foster family) to have their own advocate and support person and focuses staff attention on individual needs. The skills coach supports youth and teaches them skills.
- Foster parents are provided with an individualized and structured behavior management program that they implement under the guidance of the Team Lead. The program is structured to set clear limits and facilitate success.
- Foster parents receive an enhanced level of support from program staff and other foster parents. In addition to weekly support meetings for all of the foster parents, staff is available to foster parents 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Role of the Skills Coach

Many of the youth entering the TFCO program have failed to develop effective social skills. Typically, they have not had the kinds of experiences in early childhood that support learning appropriate skills from everyday interactions. As adolescents they tend to become involved in peer networks that are engaged in various forms of problem behavior where they learn inappropriate social skills. With both a lack of effective skills and the negative skills learned in the peer group, by the time they enter the program many youth are unable to interact in a socially appropriate way in typical settings. To address this problem, the TFCO program skills coach focuses on (1) teaching skills that enable youth to solve problems and engage in everyday prosocial interactions, and (2) integrating youth into prosocial, developmentally appropriate activities.

The skills coach's job is to provide a consistent, reinforcing environment in which youth can learn and practice prosocial behavior, problem solving skills, and coping skills. This is accomplished through one-on-one interactions in the community in which skills coaches:

- Orient youth toward socially acceptable activities in the community;
- Help youth meet treatment objectives by providing opportunities for skill practice; and
- Provide youth with more frequent feedback in a more natural "real world" environment than traditional therapy sessions allow.

The skills coach's role is well specified in the TFCO model. The skills coach is presented to the youth as a "coach"—someone who can support success in the program and elsewhere. As a member of the treatment team, the skills coach supports treatment goals by helping youth learn and use skills that are necessary to get along with others and navigate successfully in community settings. Under the direction of the Team Lead, the skills coach works with youth in identified settings to teach, practice, and reinforce appropriate prosocial behavior. Skills coaches teach by "doing"—not by talking about what to do. It is not the skills coach's role to set limits or give consequences as this could interfere with the role of supportive coach.

Skills coaches approach problematic situations in a way that helps youth identify and use more constructive responses and provides opportunities to practice those responses. This is similar to the role of a coach in an athletic setting. Coaches teach, guide, and drill their teams. They don't teach a team how to play basketball by talking about it, they get the team on the court, provide instruction on the skills, practice, reinforce, retrain, practice again, and so on until the team masters the skills and knows how to use them in a game situation. During a game when a player is making mistakes, a good coach will avoid confronting the player and demanding better performance, but will redirect the player's efforts in the moment and note the skills that need more attention during routine practices. The skills coach should learn to see problem behaviors as an opportunity to retrain, practice, and master better skills.

Skills Coach vs. Individual Therapist

The focus of the skills coach is on setting up opportunities to observe, teach, and reinforce prosocial behavior. The skills coach is in a prime position to observe youth in the community and share information about their skills and areas for skill improvement with the treatment team. Skills coaching and individual therapy sessions may look similar, however, skills coaches are more focused on getting youth engaged in recreational activities where individual therapists are more focused on problem-solving and dealing with emotional and mental health problems. For this reason, skills coaches direct youth to their individual therapists to discuss issues and concerns.

The Intervention Process

Skills coaches meet with youth for approximately two hours each week in the community. They attend weekly clinical meetings where the progress of each youth is discussed and interventions are designed and coordinated.

Phases of Intervention

Generally, there are three phases to the skills coach's intervention.

Phase 1: The focus is on getting to know the youth and building a positive relationship.

Phase 2: Transitions to doing more behavioral skill building with the youth and identifying prosocial activities that the youth likes.

Phase 3: Eases out of the relationship, preparing the youth for maintaining progress on his own.

The transitions from phase to phase are gradual shifts that tend to occur naturally rather than distinct changes of direction.

Phase 1: Getting to know the youth

Forming positive relationships with youth is the foundation for effectiveness as a skills coach. The goal during this early phase is to build a positive association between the youth and skills coach that will be the basis for the skills coach becoming an effective reinforcer. To accomplish this, the youth and skills coach should start by spending time together in ways the youth enjoys. It can take a while to figure out what the youth does and doesn't like to do, but almost all youth respond well to being taken out for a snack or meal, so this is generally a good place to start. As the skills coach gets to know the youth, coming up with activities of interest will be easier. Some activities that the youth and skills coach might do together are bowling, playing miniature golf, playing appropriate arcade games, doing crafts or hobbies, "window shopping" or browsing, going to the library to pursue an interest, visiting pets at the animal shelter, and, of course, going out for food.

Initially, skills coaches should focus on demonstrating an interest in youth as individuals and on communicating an attitude of positive regard for youth. The skills coach should identify youths' strengths and show an appreciation for their positive qualities. The skills coach should emphasize qualities that are the opposite of problem behaviors, and should actively show a disinterest in problem behaviors. Toward the end of this getting-to-know-each-other phase, youth should feel genuinely valued and respected by the skills coach. Not only is this relationship-building phase important for the success of the skills coach's next steps, it provides a model for building positive peer relationships.

Many youth in treatment programs lack the skills to develop appropriate relationships with peers and have little experience with being in positive peer relationships. This may be the first time someone has formed a relationship with them based on a positive regard.

The skills coach will be able to contribute information to the treatment team as he gets to know the youth. The youth's behavior away from home is an important focus of the TFCO program, and the skills coach is in the unique position of being able to observe and report to the rest of the treatment team about the youth's behavior in community settings. What skills coaches learn about a youth's interests can be used to determine incentives that will be motivating. The skills coach will learn about the youth's style—whether the youth is fast-paced and learns quickly or takes time to process new information. The skills coach will be able to test the degree to which staff can be explicit with the youth. Some youth respond well to a direct approach while others may react in an oppositional manner to that kind of approach and need more implicit direction. All of this information is important for individualizing the treatment program to the youth's specific needs. In addition, the skills coach uses this information to keep the context for the interactions interesting. The intervention needs to be dynamic in order to expand the repertoire of activities with which the youth feels comfortable and skilled. To accomplish this, the skills coach needs to know a great deal about the youth's interests, aspirations, and approach to the environment.

Although the Team Lead and the foster parents will have described the skills coach as a "coach" or as "someone to hang out with," it is common during this initial phase for youth to see the skills coach as another therapist. Early on, youth may start telling the skills coach about past treatment, abuse, or offending history. Youth have likely been trained that this is what most adults are interested in and that this is, in large part, who they are. Skills coaches need to be trained to reply in a compassionate way but redirect focus onto the youth's strengths and competencies, to which the youth often reacts with relief.

This initial phase of relationship building does not last for a specific period as youth vary greatly in their abilities to form relationships. With some youth, there is an element of relationship building that will take place in each meeting, and for others, the skills coach will feel connected after the initial contact. As a guideline, spend no fewer than four meetings on building a positive relationship. Often, there is a natural transition into the next skill-building phase. As the youth and skills coach get to know each other, it is common for the youth to mention things that are a problem or that the therapist has the youth working on at home. This is a great opportunity for the skills coach to offer to help the youth and become more involved with treatment objectives. If the opportunity to move into a more facilitative role with skill development does not naturally present itself, then the Team Lead should structure the transition into the next phase. Either way, the shift should be gradual. If the skills coach abruptly changes the focus of the relationship, it may catch the youth off guard and be counterproductive.

Phase 2: Behavioral skill building

The Team Lead directs the skills coach to implement interventions designed to meet the youth's treatment goals. Typically, the skills coach's efforts are focused on using effective problem-solving and coping skills or developing more appropriate basic social skills. The skills coach uses the same strategies for teaching new behaviors or strategies that the other team members use. The strategies include breaking down tasks into small manageable steps, role-playing and practicing, and using incentives and verbal reinforcement to encourage the youth. Skills coaches are trained to see problem situations as opportunities to teach new behaviors and to coach youth toward constructively responding to challenging situations and disappointments. They should leave corrective action to other members of the team. This approach is intended to preserve the supportive coaching nature of the relationship between the youth and skills coach.

The Team Lead assigns areas for skills coaches to focus on according to each youth's needs. Assignments are usually coordinated with what other members of the treatment team are doing. For example, a situation may arise where the individual therapist will be giving the youth some negative feedback. The skills coach might be asked to have the youth practice appropriately receiving negative feedback prior to the session with the therapist. Or, perhaps the family therapist would like the youth to practice a specific behavior in anticipation of a home visit.

Some typical "assignments" and areas a skills coach might work on include:

- Making eye contact or appropriate interpersonal space during interactions
- Accepting consequences or limits without argument
- Being polite and articulate (please, thank you, not mumbling)
- Using community systems (library, transportation, etc.)
- Identifying hobbies or interests
- Working on a job search (resume, applications, mock interviews)
- Developing skills to play on a team

In addition to working on specific skills, the skills coach has another objective during this middle phase of the intervention. It is important for the youth to make some positive connections in the community. Without those connections, it is likely that after returning home he will resort to the negative connections he had before placement. The skills coach should work with the youth to pursue his interests in appropriate prosocial activities and try to solidify connections accordingly.

Phase 3: Preparing the youth for maintenance

If the effort to get youth connected with some positive activities is successful, it will lead naturally into the final phase where the skills coach starts to fade out of the picture. Youth will likely want to do more and more without the skills coach as they make positive associations in the community. The skills coach can start to be more of a presence in the background. For example, if the youth has connected with a group who regularly plays basketball, the skills coach may go with the youth to the court but hang out outside of the gym or away from the court. During this final phase, responsibility for

the youth's progress shifts from the skills coach to the youth. The skills coach's role becomes more focused on helping youth self-maintain progress rather than guiding them in new directions.

Typically, the skills coach continues contact with the youth during aftercare. The nature of this contact will vary by individual and according to the progress the youth has made. Some youth have increased their competencies to the point where very little help from the skills coach is needed, while others may need more support to maintain their progress. For example, if a youth has not yet formed solid positive connections in the community, that would become the skills coach's focus in aftercare. On the other hand, if the youth is well connected, the skills coach may just check in and reinforce the youth. Regardless of the youth's needs, there should be clear and explicit goals for continued contact. The schedule should be predictable but less frequent than during treatment.

Techniques for Skills Coaches

There are a number of ways that skills coaches can accomplish their goal of supporting and encouraging positive behavior. These techniques are simple to learn and will quickly become second nature to the skills coach.

Notice, Reframe, Reinforce

It is impossible to reinforce behavior if you don't notice it. For youth in this program, many behaviors that need to be encouraged are very basic and typically go unnoticed in youth with effective social skills. Skills coaches need to get in the habit of noticing normative and prosocial behaviors. This may take some very deliberate attention at first, but will quickly become routine. For example, if a youth buckles his seat belt when getting in your car, it would probably not occur to you to comment. But in this program that is exactly the kind of behavior the skills coach should notice and reinforce. A comment like "I noticed you buckled your seat belt right away. Not everyone who rides with me remembers to do that. Thanks, that is very responsible of you, I really appreciate it." Noticing basic normative behaviors like this draws attention to what the youth is doing well and lets him know you are paying attention to those things. Most of these youth are much more accustomed to people paying attention to what they are NOT doing well. You will set yourself apart from "everyone else" and pave the way toward establishing yourself as someone to trust and learn from if you focus on what the youth is doing well, no matter how basic.

Examples of behaviors to notice

- Using a quiet voice in a restaurant or other public setting
- Saying please and thank you
- Opening the door for someone
- Remaining calm when someone else is upset
- Politely asking for things, such as asking to change the music on the radio
- Being helpful and friendly
- Initiating positive conversation
- Accepting "no" or other constructive feedback

To maximize the opportunity for reinforcement, skills coaches need to learn to "reframe" behaviors. Reframing is simply changing the meaning of a behavior or sequence of behaviors. With a photograph or painting, the frame can affect the viewer's perception of the artwork. The frame may distract the viewer and deter from the work, or the frame may complement the piece. Reframing behavior functions similarly, it changes the way behavior looks. In the example above, describing use of the seatbelt as "responsible" places a meaning to its use that may not have been there before. There are many ways to reframe ordinary or not-so-great behavior that provide reinforcement opportunities:

- **Shift the emphasis from negative aspects of the behavior to positive aspects.**

Example: You often pick John up from football practice. On previous occasions, he has tossed his wet and muddy practice clothes on top of your papers and books in the back seat. You've asked him to put them on the floor instead, but he doesn't always remember. On this particular day, he once again tosses them on your things in the back seat. When he gets into the front seat, you don't say anything; you just look in the back seat. He gets out and moves his clothes to the floor. Rather than focus on him forgetting again, you thank him for moving them, and it would be a good idea at the same time to acknowledge that he is probably hungry and offer him a snack.

- **Assign a positive intent to negative behavior and focus on that intent.**

Example: You see on the school card that Sue got in trouble for yelling at another student to "shut the f___ up." Sue explains that she yelled at the other student because that student was saying bad things about another girl in the class, calling her names, and hurting her feelings. You can acknowledge Sue's feelings of compassion, compliment her for being a caring person, point out that there may be better ways to handle the situation, and offer your help.

- **Finding positive exceptions and focusing attention on them. An ideal time to use this is with behaviors that are habitual.**

Example: Beth seems to always be chewing gum and has a habit of chewing and smacking it loudly. While this is not a serious problem, it does interfere with the impression she leaves on strangers and her ability to communicate with others in community settings. Every time she goes somewhere with you and is not chewing gum or she does so in a more appropriate way, you notice and comment about how much easier it is to understand her when she is not chewing gum.

- **Use failure and crisis as learning experiences.**

Example: Kim tells you that a younger child was pestering her last night and she "lost it" and yelled at him. As a result, she lost a lot of points on her chart and failed to earn a special privilege she was striving for. She is pretty discouraged about it. You could acknowledge that younger children can be very annoying and offer to help her practice more appropriate ways to handle it when the younger child is being a pest.

The primary ways to reinforce desired behavior are through verbal comments, non-verbal gestures, and incentives. Of course, verbal reinforcement is always at your disposal, and there are endless ways to verbally reinforce behavior. Skills coaches will have to find words that fit their style. What works for one skills coach may not work for another, and what works with some youth may not work with others.

Examples of verbal reinforcement

- "It's nice that you..."
- "Way to go!"
- "Great job!"
- "You make it so fun to hang out every week because you..."
- "I like the way you..."
- "Thank you for..."
- "I appreciate that you..."

Sometimes, a simple gesture may be a more effective way to let a youth know you noticed something positive. Especially in situations where verbal reinforcement might embarrass the youth, a nod, thumbs up, or some other approving sign are all ways to let the youth know that you noticed. Later, at a more appropriate time, you can verbally acknowledge that you noticed.

A very effective way to reinforce youth is with simple rewards. Research has shown that youth with emotional and behavioral problems are less responsive than their typical peers to social rewards such as adult approval, but learn equally as well when tangible rewards such as tokens, food, privileges, or money are used. In fact, the strategies used throughout the TFCO program were developed from this research and rely heavily on the use of tangible rewards and incentives. Given that youth in this program are less likely to be responsive to adult approval, skills coaches should couple verbal reinforcement with a primary reinforcer, such as food. Since youth are likely to respond positively to food, etc., they will begin to make a positive association with the skills coaches and their approval. A little later, it may be appropriate to “uncouple” verbal and tangible reinforcement, but, especially in the beginning, it is important to get the youth’s attention and encourage the kind of relationship that will maximize the skills coach’s potential to impact the youth’s behavior.

In the previous example, where the skills coach reinforced Joe for putting on his seat belt, offering a snack at the same time is a good idea. The skills coach could say something like “I noticed you buckled your seat belt right away. Not everyone who rides with me remembers to do that. Thanks, that is really responsible of you, I really appreciate it. By the way, there are some peanuts in the glove box, help yourself.” Skills coaches should keep a supply of things like nuts, dried fruit, jerky, gum, candy, etc., handy in their car or backpack and try to find out early on what simple things the youth likes.

Later in the intervention, under the direction of the Team Lead, the skills coach will be more involved in the incentives being used in the youth’s behavior plan. The skills coach may be involved in monitoring the youth’s school card and offering incentives that have been approved by the Team Lead. The school card or the youth’s current status in the behavior plan (Level 1, 2, or 3) can be used to determine the kinds of activities the youth and skills coach do together. Things that the youth *really* likes to do with the skills coach can be used as incentives. For example, Bob really likes to play pool with his skills coach. In order for Bob and his skills coach to be able to play pool during their sessions, Bob has to have a perfect school card for the week prior. A youth who likes to go to fast food restaurants with the skills coach may have to be on Level 2. If he is on Level 1 for a day, he can’t go to McDonalds that day. The Team Lead will set the parameters and arrange in advance how much latitude the skills coach has with offering special activities as incentives.

Modeling Targeted Behaviors

A primary role for the skills coach is that of modeling appropriate behavior. Typically, these youth did not grow up in environments where adults engaged in everyday, prosocial interactions. To make matters worse, as they got older they often oriented themselves toward peers with similar skill deficits. Many have never had adult or peer models of appropriate behavior and have never learned to interact in socially appropriate ways in typical community settings.

Once skills coaches have developed a positive and trusting relationship with youth and have their attention, they are in a prime position to teach new skills by modeling them. Since everything the skills coach does potentially serves as a model to the youth, the skills coach should always behave in a way that provides a positive example. Especially important characteristics to demonstrate are cooperation, reasonableness, patience, consideration, and respect when interacting with others in the community. The skills coach will become involved in more direct modeling of specific skills targeted for improvement by the Team Lead.

Example of coaching and modeling

The foster parents report that Jane is very quiet and rarely speaks up for what she wants. When she does talk, she talks quietly and mumbles. The skills coach has noticed that when they have gone to a fast food restaurant for a soda, Jane prefers to tell the skills coach what she wants and wait at the table. The Team Lead directs the skills coach to work with Jane to practice appropriately asking for what she wants.

The skills coach starts by making sure that Jane accompanies her to the counter and hears her order and pay for the food. The skills coach will deliberately ask a few questions (how much does something cost, what sizes do they have, etc.) using a regular tone of voice during the exchange with the clerk in order to model for Jane how to get information. While they are eating, the skills coach may comment on how nice and helpful the people are at this restaurant. After doing this a few times, as they enter the restaurant the skills coach hands Jane the money and tells her to go ahead and order while she gets a table. When Jane is done ordering and comes to the table, the skills coach may tell Jane how much she appreciates her help or comment that she heard how nicely Jane thanked the clerk, or some other reinforcing comment.

Teaching New Behaviors

At some point in the intervention, skills coaches will become more actively involved in teaching new or alternative skills. Skills coaches might be assigned to work on a wide range of behaviors. Often, the behaviors youth need help with are the prosocial opposite of the problem behaviors they exhibit. For example, with a very shy youth, the skills coach may work on learning to be assertive. If a youth is impulsive, the skills coach may be assigned to work on teaching how to think things through and be patient. Another frequently assigned task for skills coaches is teaching youth to accept consequences or criticism.

An effective way to teach new behaviors is by shaping them. Shaping is a technique for molding new behaviors that were not previously part of a person's repertoire, or for modifying the intensity or force of a behavior. Shaping can be used with a wide range of behaviors and is most effective for changes in behavior that will be difficult or that may involve a more complicated series of steps. Some problem behaviors may have become such habits that it would be too much to expect a youth to completely change them all at once. These kinds of behaviors can be effectively changed through gradual reinforcement of changes that lead toward the targeted behavior. Shaping is most effective when the targeted behavior and criteria for reinforcement are clearly specified. When shaping behavior, one should start with behaviors the youth is already exhibiting that somewhat resemble the targeted behavior and reinforce slight changes as they approximate that behavior. Finding a starting point can be difficult, but by carefully observing the youth one can usually pinpoint something that resembles the targeted behavior. Initially, the skills coach should continuously reinforce behaviors that approximate the target. As those behaviors increase in frequency, the skills coach should start differentially reinforcing successive approximations until the targeted behavior is reached. Shaping behavior in this manner usually produces long-lasting change. It is, however, a gradual process that requires patience, diligence, and consistency.

Steps for shaping:

1. Identify the problem behavior and define the prosocial opposite of the behavior
2. Break down the prosocial behavior into small steps
3. Identify which behaviors the youth has in his/her repertoire
4. Identify an appropriate reinforcer

Examples of Shaping

The foster parents report that Kevin does not respond appropriately when people greet him. The therapist and skills coach have also noticed that he does not say hello when in the office or when they meet him for sessions. It is clear that he does not have the skills to engage in appropriate social interactions.

In the clinical meeting, the Team Lead and the treatment team defines the specific behavior that they want Kevin to learn. The first thing the team wants Kevin to learn is to respond with "hello" when someone says "hello" to him, the second step would be for him to initiate by saying "hello" first, the third step would be for him to shake the person's hand, and the fourth step would be to make a positive statement such as, *"It's nice to see you."*

In their next session, the skills coach models saying "hello" to the receptionist in the office and encourages Kevin to say "hello" too when the receptionist greets them. *"I'm going to introduce you to our new receptionist, you can say hello, and she will remember you the next time you come in."* When the youth says hello to the receptionist, regardless of appropriate eye contact or mumbling, the skills coach will reinforce the youth by a positive comment to him, handing him a Hershey's Kiss, or saying something positive about the youth to the receptionist. *"Kevin will be coming in every week and he is a really friendly guy."*

Once Kevin routinely responds to hello, the skills coach will reinforce him for initiating the greeting before the other person and then move on to the other steps.

Encouraging Cooperation and Preventing Resistance

Developing a positive relationship with youth will be the most effective way skills coaches can prevent their resistance. A supportive relationship coupled with the fact that skills coaches are not involved in limit setting naturally supports youths' cooperation. Still, youth are bound to engage in resistant or uncooperative behavior from time to time. Skills coaches can use a number of communication tactics to encourage cooperation and avoid resistance.

- **Label behavior in positive terms—what to do, instead of what not to do.**

When youth only hear what not to do, there may be ambiguity about what they are supposed to do. Labeling behavior in terms of what to do makes expectations clear. Also, telling someone what not to do often increases the likelihood that they will perform the undesired behavior. A mental image is created of the thing they're not to do.

THIS: "I'd like you to walk beside me so we can hear each other better."

NOT THIS: "Don't lag behind me when we are walking down the street."

- **Think about how to make suggestions that will enlist the most cooperation from the youth.** A very direct suggestion makes some youth immediately resistant. The youth may be more open to suggestion when an indirect approach is used.

- Using sort of a halfway strategy, make a suggestion but let the youth know it is his decision. "You know, I think people are more helpful if you say thank you more often, but that's up to you."
- Depending on the nature of the suggestion, consider how directive you want to be. Often, suggestions are more acceptable if they are less directed at the youth personally and presented in a way that is more directed at people in general.

Sometimes people find it helpful to...

This other kid I know found it helpful to...

I found it helpful to...

Maybe this is not a good idea, but...

You might not be able to do this, but...

I usually do this with older kids, but...

- In some situations, it may be effective to imbed suggestions for behavior changes in other conversations. It is a good way to "plant the seed" and see where the youth takes it. For example, a suggestion could be imbedded in a story about another youth or skills coach. Or a suggestion could be made as a terminating statement in a conversation, and then the subject is completely changed.

Approaching Problem Behavior as a Coach

It is not generally the skills coach's role to deal with problem behaviors as they are occurring. Direct intervention in problematic situations could lead to an oppositional relationship with the youth, which would undermine the skills coach's ability to maintain a positive and supportive relationship. Rather, coaching is focused on teaching alternative responses to problem behaviors, all of the strategies discussed so far are useful. In keeping with the goal of seeing problem behaviors as teaching opportunities, it is a good idea for skills coaches to avoid direct confrontation and challenge. For example, in a situation where a youth is being disrespectful to someone in the community, a good strategy for the skills coach would be to distract the youth and bring up the situation in the clinical meeting where the team can problem solve about alternative responses. The coach may be given the task of teaching and practicing these responses at a later time. The coach would not confront, challenge, or "demand" that the youth behave differently in the moment.

When youth enter the TFCO program, there are numerous adults and agencies involved in their lives. Youth in this program typically perceive many of these as opposing forces, including parents, police, school personnel, probation/parole officer, treatment staff, and negative peers. They may also perceive parents, peers, and school personnel to be supportive forces in their lives. It is very common for youth to have difficulty dealing with 'opposition' and working with others in a cooperative manner. Skills coaches are often assigned to help youth learn to handle opposition in a more constructive way, develop supportive relationships, and to become better "team" players.

As the skills coach coaches the youth, it is important to remember that interactions between them will affect third parties. Skills coaches should make sure that in their effort to support youth, they are not inadvertently undermining other authority figures. Given the alliance that forms between the youth and the skills coach, it is natural for the youth to expect the skills coach to "take his side" and act as an advocate with authority figures or opposing forces. Skills coaches can stay out of the middle of conflicts in a number of ways, support authority figures, and teach the youth more constructive responses.

- Always show respect for authority figures and work within their values and preferences.
- When talking to the youth, support authority figures by focusing on their intentions. For example, if a youth complains that a teacher doesn't allow late homework, the skills coach would focus on the teacher's intention to encourage students to be ready for the work world where things must be done on time.
- Support the youth in his realistic appraisal of the authority figure, acknowledging limitations while at the same time supporting the authority figure's strengths, contributions, and intentions.
- Coach the youth to deal with authority figures in a respectful way. Pre-teach and role-play difficult situations.

Using Supervision from the Team Lead

Maintaining Your Role

Given the positive relationship that develops between youth and skills coaches, it is natural for youth to see skills coaches as advocates or rescuers. Youth may very subtly or even overtly try to engage skills coaches in their conflicts with others or try to get them to advocate for them to other treatment program staff. In addition, it is common for youth to see their skills coach as another therapist. Very early on, youth may begin talking about their treatment, abuse, or offending history. They have likely been trained or conditioned to think that these facts are what is interesting to adults and that this is a significant part of their identity. A response that is compassionate and yet redirects the conversation is appropriate—something like: “Before we get going too far here, I appreciate your trusting me enough to want to tell me about this. But what I’m really interested in is knowing more about the kinds of things that you do well or want to hear how to do.” Such a response would need to be tailored to the specific situation, but is often met with relief by the youth and sets the stage for discussions of strengths and competencies.

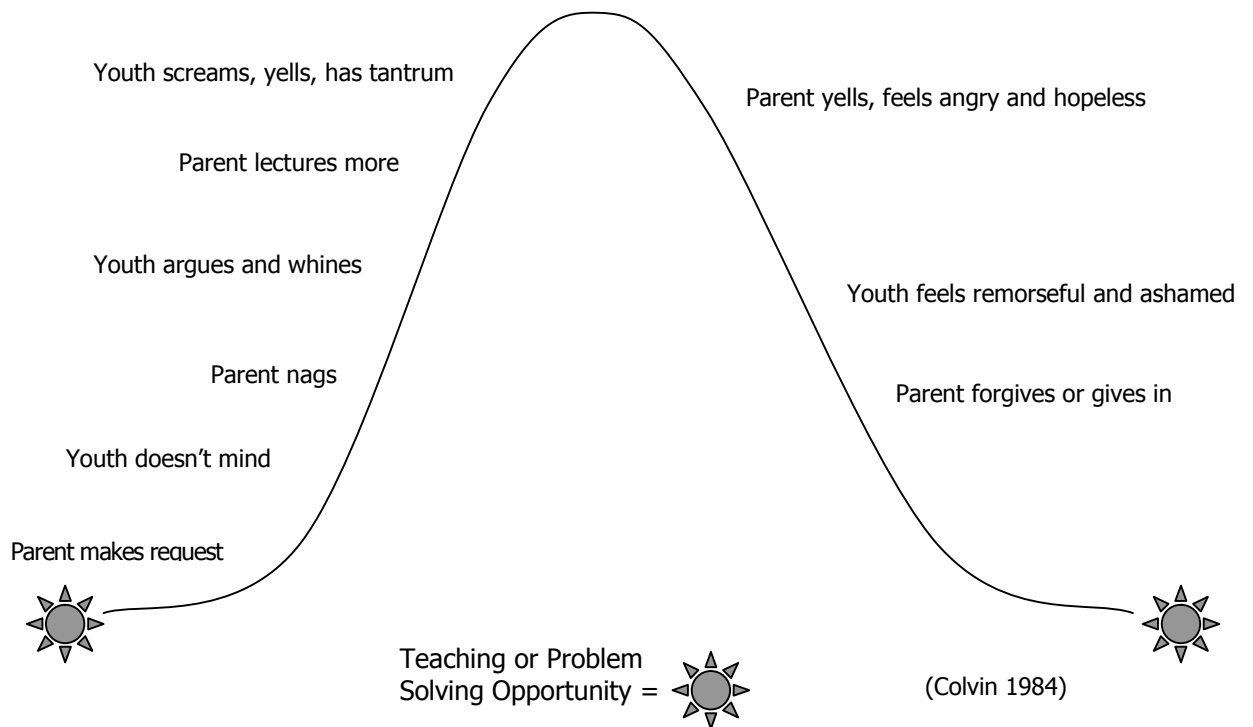
Skills coaches need to take care to avoid being pulled into areas that are not appropriate for their involvement. Supervision is the key to avoiding this pitfall. Skills coaches should keep the Team Lead informed and clarify their role anytime they feel unsure. The Team Lead can help formulate appropriate responses when skills coaches are pressured by youth to work outside their role.

Emotional Reactions

Skills coaches might be surprised by their reactions, especially if it is the first time they have worked with youth with social, emotional, or behavioral problems. Youth in this program have a history of evoking negative reactions from adults. They will do things that provoke a wide range of negative emotions—pity, anger, sadness, etc. Their social skills may be so dismal that the skills coach finds some youth generally “unlikable.” Still, skills coaches need to remain positive and focused on youths’ strengths, which can be a challenge if they let their own reactions get in the way. Skills coaches should be aware of their reactions and talk about them with their Team Lead. The Team Lead can help sort out emotional reactions and maintain the focus of the program. Skills coaches should try to stay focused on helping youth to succeed and refrain from judging youth by reminding themselves that they don’t know what youth have experienced and the challenges they are up against. Supervision from the Team Lead helps maintain a positive perspective.

Dealing with Difficult Situations

It is possible that at some time during the course of the intervention the youth will become very emotional in the presence of the skills coach. It is helpful to understand a little about the progression of an emotional outburst.



An emotional outburst takes a typical path. First, a trigger starts the agitation, then the agitation escalates until it peaks and starts to deescalate until the individual becomes acquiescent and then recovers to a normal state. The skills coach should be aware of this process to avoid making a bad situation worse. Trying to intervene while a person is escalating, at the peak, or de-escalating is ineffective. Effective times to intervene in the process are at the trigger stage where suggestions or steps may be taken to avert the process and after the individual recovers when the focus can be on how to prevent the process in the future.

Youth in TFCO usually have an extensive history of acting out behavioral problems. It is quite possible that the skills coach will be in a situation where the youth is acting out in an extreme manner. It is not possible to anticipate all of the potentially extreme circumstances that could arise and develop a response plan for each of them. A better approach is to have some sound operating rules that can be applied and adapted to individual situations as needed.

The first and best way to deal with a crisis is to **avoid it**. Of course, this will not always be possible and is not at all helpful at the time of a crisis, but there are some things skills coaches can do to avert a potentially difficult situation. Skills coaches should monitor the warning signs that are often present before

Strategies for effectively avoiding a crisis

- Avoid situations that are likely to result in youth escalating their negative behavior.
- Monitor the warning signs present before youth engage in negative behavior.
- Monitor your own and other's reactions to youths' negative behavior.

a youth starts acting out. These include level of agitation, anxiety, and increased rate and volume of speech. When people are in the presence of someone becoming agitated, they often “match” those agitated behaviors without thinking about it. Skills coaches should take care to monitor their reactions to an agitated youth. If the youth is jumpy, irritable, and talking rapidly, the skills coach should be careful not to start talking faster and become irritable. That will only “fuel” the youth and escalate the behavior. Often, changing your reaction can change the youth's trajectory. An intentional shift to calmer, slower, more relaxed behavior on the part of the skills coach may be enough to avoid escalating problems.

Second, even when we do our best to monitor and diffuse situations, there are times when youth bring topics or issues into the session that the skills coach cannot change. In this situation, a good strategy is to disassociate from the problem that is agitating the youth. The skills coach should try to frame the source of the agitation away from the moment and out of the youth's control. For example, the skills coach might be asked to pick up a youth who is being sent home from school because of problem behavior. It is common for such youth to already be quite agitated and reactive to all adults. The skills coach should try to separate from the problem. Remembering not to put the foster parents in the middle, skills coaches could use the Team Lead or the generic “program” as the source of the problem and agitation. This might go something like: “John, I know this is hard right now, but the program requires that I come and pick you up. Have some raisins.” Using the “program” as the source for directives or situations that the youth is agitated about is a good way for the skills coach to separate himself. It sends the message to the youth that there is no point in directing this agitation at the skills coach, as he was not a part of the directive and offering a snack gives a signal of caring and concern.

Third, skills coaches need a way to contact other program professionals at all times. When something is not going in a fruitful direction, skills coaches need to be able to reach a more experienced program professional. A message number is not sufficient here, as problems may need more immediate attention than a message system allows. Skills coaches need to know how to reach a professional and how to be persistent should the first attempt to reach someone fail. Before meeting with the youth, the skills coach and Team Lead should discuss how to contact professionals when necessary. They should also discuss how to present information in a meaningful way during a phone call. It is important that the Team Lead receives the necessary information while minimizing the length of the call.

Fourth, after a difficult or extreme situation is resolved, the skills coach should contact the Team Lead as soon as possible. The Team Lead will want to follow-up, address the youth's actions, and debrief with the skills coach.

Getting Started

After the introduction by the Team Lead, a typical first encounter would involve the skills coach picking up the youth at school or home and taking her to get something to eat. Try to be upbeat and positive and make the meeting fun. A good ice-breaking activity is to make a list of things the youth likes to do. This could include things she likes to do in the community, with others or alone, at home, at school, etc. The idea is to get to know the youth and discover things you might want to do together in the future. As mentioned previously, the youth may want to tell the story of her life. Interrupt the youth in a compassionate manner, letting her know that it's ok if she wants to talk about those things, but that you would rather talk about... Redirect the youth to something more positive like what she likes to do in her spare time, what she likes about the foster home, what she sees as her strengths, etc.

Since a big part of your mission is to get the youth involved in appropriate and prosocial activities in the community, during these early encounters you should be gathering information about things the youth likes to do. As you get to know the youth better, that will be easier. Some activities may need pre-teaching. For example, some limits or "rules" may be necessary in order for the youth to go to an arcade, an environment where it difficult to behave appropriately. You should avoid going to movies or doing other activities where the opportunity for interaction is limited, and you should not bring the youth's peers with you. If there are other skills coaches in your program, be sure to share ideas about places to go and things to do.

Once youth understand and accept your role, the sky is the limit as to the ways in which you can help them succeed. Have fun, create opportunities for success—and encourage, encourage, encourage!