

The Three Point Plan

By Radha Selvester - CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Inc.

Once upon a time there were two little boys who shared a mother. This mother didn't get along with her current partner, the father of the younger boy. At 6 & 8 years old, Mark and Bill* had witnessed lots of fighting between their parents. In fact, their parents had been arrested multiple times for domestic violence. When they were placed in my home as foster children, the adverse effects of their violent upbringing were self-evident.

Mark and Bill joined my household in the beginning of the summer, meaning they would not be in school during the day. My own biological son was 7 at the time and was quite excited about having two boys his age to play with during the break, but it wasn't quite as much fun as he had hoped.

You see, Mark and Bill were severely lacking in social skills. While most parents try hard to teach by both instruction and example how to get our needs met through peaceful means, this was a foreign concept for Mark and Bill. So if one of the boys was accidentally bumped or looked at with a peculiar expression, he would instantly start to fight the offender. They had never learned to ask politely to have a turn with a toy or to say excuse me if they accidentally bothered someone. They had no tolerance for things not going their way and no patience to wait to get their desires fulfilled.

One day I went to the bathroom for a minute, leaving the boys in the kitchen. I returned to see *all three* with knives in their hands ready to go for the jugular! Some small offense (he looked at me funny) had triggered this potentially lethal response. It was time to make some changes.

We developed the Three Point Plan. For kids raised by peaceful parents, this would be natural but for Mark and Bill it had to be spelled out for them.

- 1) If someone is doing something that bothers you, ASK THEM NICELY to stop.
- 2) If they won't stop, MOVE AWAY from them.
- 3) If you are still being bothered, ASK A GROWN-UP to help you.

We worked on reinforcing these new behaviors diligently. We had nightly readings from Bobby & the Brockles (Faber/Mazlish) where Bobby is visited by Murray and Groot who each give him advice on how to deal with various social situations. Groot would tell Bobby to kick his sister in the shins for taking his new crayons, but Murray would recommend telling her with words how he feels instead. Bobby went from being in conflict with family and friends all the time, to learning how to get along in the world, getting his needs met without fighting. Bobby developed better communication skills and learned to work cooperatively to solve problems. Mark, Bill, and my son really enjoyed story time and I could see progress in their behavior and attitudes. I persevered.

I was fortunate to have a summer day camp program nearby that accepted Mark and Bill as campers. The director was a wonderful woman who managed kid behaviors with expertise and care. (I'm sure she was underpaid for her amazing skill, but she was surely a blessing to me as I had to have a break from

the boys each day to be able to catch my breath!) The director was able to engage the boys and keep their behaviors in check, while reinforcing the skills I was trying to teach them at home.

One day, the camp director called me to pick the boys up from camp for fighting. I actually expected this call every day but it only happened once. I was disappointed in them but decided not to judge until I heard their side of the story.

When I arrived at the camp, the boys came running toward me yelling, “We remembered the three point plan right *after* we hit him!” They were so sincere, I couldn’t be mad at them! Breaking a bad habit and replacing it with a new one isn’t easy. There will be slip ups and backslides. They were only little boys and they *were* really trying.

Soon after this, the judge came up with a plan for the boys to leave foster care. They were each sent to live with a different parent and the parents were court-ordered to stay away from each other. Maybe it wasn’t the ideal solution but I have to admit I was relieved to have them leave.

Those five weeks they were in my home were probably the toughest I’d ever experienced with my foster children at that time. It took a lot of energy to work with them but I felt like I was getting through so sacrificed my own peace of mind to try to help them.

A few months later I happened to bump into Mark at a store. He gave me a big hug and told me that the month he spent with me was the best in his life. I was dumbfounded. It had actually been one of the most difficult months in my life but it was so rewarding to realize I had made a difference in the lives of two children.

If your children are having a hard time getting along – with parents, siblings, peers, or teachers – please call CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Inc. to inquire about free counseling services for children age 6-17. CDS also offers a residential program (Interface Youth Shelters) for adolescents. (352) 244-0628 www.cdsfl.org

*Names and identifying facts were changed, but this story is based on my true experiences as a foster parent.