

Praise for FLIP IT®

I just wanted to tell you how much I love FLIP IT! It's absolutely amazing, and I'm passionate about teaching it to the daycare providers I work with. It's simple, yet extremely effective. The acronym helps providers think straight and remember what to do in the midst of frustration. It's the best method I've learned since I started teaching in the 80s. FLIP IT is easy, but makes me more creative when listing prompts. One more thing that's fun to know is that my eight-year-old daughter can FLIP: She understands it, knows what she's doing, and can FLIP you faster than you know what hit you! I always tell my providers that if my eight-year-old can do it, they can too!

Amy Anderson, Professional Development Associate,
Project REACH, University of Missouri

I just finished my very first FLIP IT training. The teachers involved are veteran preschool teachers, and they were challenged to think about how they were responding to children. I felt like we had many "lightbulb" moments as we discussed feelings, the use of "buts" when identifying feelings, and making inquiries for children. As they were challenged to think outside the box, they persevered, and their desire to use the strategies was evident. . . . I cannot thank you enough.

Pam Hamon, Special Services Specialist, Head Start, Richland WA

WOW. I am still FLIP IT crazy...We continue to brag on it every chance we get. It is so important to us and the children we serve.

Sunni Zimmer, Mental Health and Disabilities Coordinator,
CAPE-Head Start/Early, Evansville, IN

I have been using it with my four- and eight-year-olds with a lot of success—even this morning when my four-year-old was upset because she could not find her blanket. It was cool to see her think through the process and find the solution on her own, later asking me, "Daddy, are you happy that I am using my manners and not having a fit over my blankie?" Thank you for making my life a little easier!

Ken Baker, Special Counselor and Dad,
Devereux Kanner Center, West Chester, PA

FLIP IT![®]



Transforming
Challenging Behavior



Four supportive steps to help young children
learn about their feelings, gain self-control,
and reduce challenging behavior

Rachel Wagner Sperry, MSW
with the Devereux Center for Resilient Children

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Disclaimer

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FLIP IT®

FLIP IT is a four-step supportive strategy to help young children learn about their feelings, gain self-control, and reduce challenging behavior.

The FLIP IT guide teaches adults how to respond positively to everyday challenges and challenging behaviors in children ages three to eight. The guide walks teachers and families through the four FLIP IT steps in an easy-to-read format. Symbols and pictures make it easier to remember the steps. As you study, write your thoughts in the reflection boxes and use the photos of challenging scenarios to practice your FLIP IT responses.

FLIP IT workshops are offered online or in a classroom setting. For more information, contact the Devereux Center for Resilient Children at 1-866-TRAINUS or www.moreflipit.org.



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Joshua Sperry, for the twinkle in his eye whenever I talk about FLIP IT.

Setting the Stage for FLIP IT

“It’s OK, honey. You’re OK. Come on out and sit with me.” We may say these words to a child who is scared and has crawled under a table. The tone and the sentiment are gentle and nurturing but do not help the child understand the emotions that got her under the table in the first place. By beginning to understand the feelings that made her crawl under the table, she can then learn to independently cope with those challenging feelings in a healthier way. FLIP IT provides a simple way to help children do this.

FLIP IT offers a strength-based, commonsense, and effective four-step strategy. Adults can use FLIP IT when confronting a number of challenging behaviors, such as crawling under the table, throwing toys, whining, spitting, or hitting peers. The four steps embodied in the FLIP IT mnemonic include:



- 1. FEELINGS:** Gently talk with the child about his feelings. Tell him what you see and hear as a result of his emotions. Help him to identify the root feelings causing the behavior.

- 2. LIMITS:** Remind the child of the positive limits and expectations you have for his behavior. Loving and simple limits help surround children with a sense of consistency, safety, and trust.

- 3. INQUIRIES:** Encourage the child to think about solutions to his challenges. Ask questions that promote problem-solving and healthy coping skills. Inquiries invite children to think, learn, and gain self-regulation.

- 4. PROMPTS:** Provide creative cues, clues, and suggestions for the child who is having difficulty. Enthusiastic, bright ideas can lead the way to better problem-solving skills.


FLIP IT is best practiced by using all four steps in fairly quick succession (1–10 minutes from start to finish). Experienced FLIP IT users may find that only one or two steps are needed to resolve the situation.

FLIP IT incorporates best-practice approaches into a method that is easy to remember and applicable in a variety of challenging situations. FLIP IT may be used every day for minor challenges and conflicts with one child or with multiple children. FLIP IT also can be used as a targeted intervention intended to support the emotional growth of a child displaying specific behavioral concerns. FLIP IT requires consistency to bring about long-term change. Children who frequently experience the FLIP IT process become emotionally aware problem-solvers who develop healthy coping skills that will last a lifetime.

While FLIP IT is a versatile and portable strategy, it may not always be the best strategy for a given situation. FLIP IT can and should be integrated with effective strategies that support the development of positive relationships, emotional awareness, problem-solving skills, and healthy coping in children (and adults). Please note that the FLIP IT strategy requires time and consistency. It is



not the magical answer for every challenging situation. FLIP IT, by itself, is not designed to resolve severe emotional and behavioral issues. In such cases, seek support from mental health professionals to establish a comprehensive plan that may include FLIP IT. Finally, FLIP IT considers the root causes of a child's behavior but does not center on the functional behavioral assessment process used by many mental health professionals.

FLIP IT Began with Haley

As a preschool teacher, I noticed children's challenging behavior on the rise, and I felt discouraged that the strategies and techniques I had learned did not work. I was desperate for something that would help me with a young girl in my class who was beginning to keep me awake at night with worry. Haley had lived through a lot; she had been abused, placed in a shelter, expelled from several preschools for her violent behavior, and at the time lived in a foster home. On a typical day at preschool, she attacked other children, called me terrible names, kicked me in the shins, and told me I was fat, all while attempting to "rip my eyeballs out." Haley's challenging behavior was clearly coming from a deep and emotionally hurt place.

I needed a strategy that would address not only the behaviors but the hurt behind them. With guidance from the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program, the wisdom of early childhood leaders, and the suggestions of my very wise co-workers, friends, and family, my colleagues and I began consistently responding to Haley's challenging behavior with four simple steps. Our approach (now known as FLIP IT)





was rooted in the development of an empathic, trusting relationship. With that base, we were able to teach Haley about emotional awareness and support her development of emotional control through problem-solving and healthy coping skills.

Every time Haley tried to “rip my eyeballs out,” I acknowledged her FEELINGS and then set a loving LIMIT. I would say, “Haley, I see you are getting so mad. Remember we agreed to keep each other safe here.” Then I would INQUIRE to encourage problem solving (“What can we do to help you with your mad?”) and PROMPT her with coping strategies (“Can we rub your back or squeeze some play dough?”).

By consistently using the FEELINGS step, we helped Haley understand and identify the painful emotions that bubbled up inside her before she would lash out. Just like every adult, each child has to develop her own unique coping strategies. After some trial and error with INQUIRIES and PROMPTS, we found that foot scratching worked best to soothe Haley. After several months of using FLIP IT with consistency, Haley learned to identify her own emotions and would often rip off her socks and ask for a foot scratch instead of attacking children and teachers. Haley’s foster parents supported her progress by using FLIP IT at home. Later they adopted Haley, who went to kindergarten with a back scratcher for her feet! Haley is now a young woman who has been well loved and supported, and while she will always struggle with the trauma from her early years, she has coping skills. For children like Haley, FLIP IT is just one of many strategies used as part of a much more comprehensive plan to support all their needs.

You will find that the FLIP IT strategy is not new. It takes all that is old, wise, and good and makes it easy to remember and use. This strategy is not about trying to control children like Haley but about teaching them to control themselves in the context of a loving and safe relationship.

Since my work with Haley, I have become a social worker and have shared the FLIP IT strategy with many teachers and families. I am excited to share FLIP IT with you, and I hope you find it a rewarding and helpful strategy.

Resilience Theory and the FLIP IT Strategy

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficulty, misfortune, or change. The FLIP IT strategy helps children become resilient by teaching them how to cope in times of challenge. FLIP IT can be used as a stand-alone technique and/or as a strategy to enhance the implementation of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program, an assessment and planning system that measures and promotes protective factors in young children.

Three critical protective factors in the development of resilience in young children are attachment, initiative, and self-regulation. Attachment is the mutual, strong, and long-lasting relationship between a child and a significant adult, such as a parent, family member, or teacher. Initiative is the child's ability to use independent thought and action to meet his needs. Self-regulation is the child's ability to experience a range of feelings and express them using the words and actions that society considers appropriate. To be resilient and successful in school and life, children need to develop all three of these healthy protective factors. FLIP IT can be a powerful tool for supporting that process.



Throughout the FLIP IT guide, a DECA Program logo appears when the material presented can link to resources in the DECA Program.

Adults do not need to use the DECA Program to try the FLIP IT strategy, but the DECA Program philosophy and resources complement and enhance efforts to promote positive behavior in children.





For more information on the Devereux Center for Resilient Children resources and materials see Appendix E.

Relationships and Empathy

Every strategy we use with children will only be as successful as the relationship it is built upon. We learn best from people who make us feel safe, valued, and understood. For a child, FLIP IT is the process of learning about feelings and healthy coping skills, and a caring adult must facilitate this learning. Strive every day to strengthen your relationship with the child through play, listening, respect, and caring. FLIP IT also can help strengthen the bond between you and the child, because the FEELINGS step conveys empathy, the ability to see and feel from another person's perspective. Seeing challenging situations through the eyes of the child is critical to the FLIP IT process. Even if the emotion or challenge seems small to you, try to imagine what it means to the child at his age, in his world, with his limited life experiences. Empathy while using FLIP IT means honoring a "child-size problem" for what it means to that child. Showing empathy to a child is the first step in teaching him to have empathy for others.

When we look through the eyes of a child, we notice what she feels as well as how she reacts to the people and environment around her. Sometimes a child's negative emotions are a direct result of something we can and should change about ourselves or the environment. Empathy helps us become more aware of the child and more aware of ourselves. Try to embrace the lessons empathy teaches. Teachers, parents, and caregivers do not always know what to do, and they often feel as though they have done the wrong thing. As you learn to use FLIP IT, you may find yourself feeling skeptical, guilty, overwhelmed, or frustrated. Try to be gentle with yourself on this journey, and take time to notice your own feelings.

In times of personal stress, try using FLIP IT on yourself first. Practice the four FLIP IT steps to improve your own emotional awareness and emotional control. This can make you a better FLIP'er and a happier person.

- 1. FEELINGS:** Notice what is happening inside you during times of stress, before you react. Ask yourself, “What am I really feeling?” Explore your emotions.

- 2. LIMITS:** Decide what the appropriate boundaries or limits are for the situation.

- 3. INQUIRIES:** Ask yourself, “What is the best way to handle this?”

- 4. PROMPTS:** Use creative thinking if you have difficulty finding a solution. Ask a friend, family member, or colleague for suggestions to help you think outside the box.


Becoming aware of your feelings, knowing your limits, and using healthy coping skills to solve problems will help you on your personal journey, in your work with children, and in your relationships with other adults.

A Child in Mind

As you read the FLIP IT guide, you may find it useful to have in mind one or more children you want to try the FLIP IT process on. Use the opportunities presented in this guide to jot down reflections about your particular situation.

As you prepare to use the FLIP IT strategy with a child, it is important to reflect on who he is, so that you may better empathize with his point of view during challenging times. Get a more complete view of the child by making regular observations of his behavior and consulting multiple sources of information (other adults, medical records, and so on). Take a moment to reflect on a particular child and write down his strengths and interests.



List the child's strengths:

List the child's interests:

What needs or challenges does the child present to you?

List the child's challenges:
