

Psycho-Educational Skills for Managing Students with Recurrent Behavior Problems: Cognitive-Emotive Interventions

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Introduction

These are dramatic times for teachers. In educating children, we have a difficult and demanding role. Like no other, our profession is responsible in ensuring that children develop emotionally, socially, and academically. As society evolves in complexity, so does our role. With so many social and emotional issues influencing directly a student's potential for learning, we can no longer guarantee our success in educating children relying only on academic expertise. The fact is that, like adults, in coping with today society's pressures and demands, children are paying a heavy emotional toll too. At alarming rates, more and more children and adolescents are experiencing all kinds of stress and trauma reactions, and at all levels of severity. This can turn into a chaotic scenario for teachers if it catches us ill prepared.

Since children's affective and emotional status strongly influence how they perform in the classroom, it is imperative for teachers to become acquainted with how students develop and function socio-emotionally. If we are going to remain effective in doing our job –thriving rather than simply surviving—we need direct access to the current ideas and latest development in psycho-education, a therapeutic educational model that blends psychological, sociological, biological, and educational theories and research.

How Habitually Disruptive and Acting-Out Students Benefit from a Therapeutic Model

Psycho-education, a multidimensional model to the education and treatment of children with emotional and behavioral difficulties, trains children in understanding how feelings and emotions relate to their behavioral difficulties. To help change dysfunctional behavior, this therapeutic model contains a mixture of affective (emotions), cognitive (thinking), and behavioral (behavior) elements, so that students with recurrent behavior problems learn to recognize and understand how their emotions and way of thinking drive their particular pattern of behavior. This therapeutic model is based on the principle that behavioral change comes when children are able to understand the motives behind their behavior and are properly trained in productive and more positive ways of behaving.

What Therapeutic Teachers Do for Habitually Disruptive and Acting-Out Students

Focusing on the unique socio-emotional needs of the acting-out child, a therapeutic teacher develops an adult-child relationship that is conducive to a new insight, and is growth promoting. The therapeutic teacher coaches children in finding alternative ways of meeting their socio-emotional needs in a more effective and socially appropriate fashion. The teacher-student therapeutic relationship takes into full consideration the cognitive and affective factors that are influencing behavior, and involves the student in finding and implementing alternative ways of behaving. Students are actively involved throughout this process in their own emotional and behavioral improvement.

A therapeutic model is ingrained in the belief that all troubled behavior is determined by a multiplicity of factors in interaction, and that, to be able to change problem behavior, every aspect of the child's personality -feeling, thinking, and behaving- needs to be taken into account. The therapeutic teacher explains psycho-educational concepts and techniques to children, and trains disruptive and acting-out students in how to self-manage emotions and behavior. The therapeutic teacher develops an accepting and trusting relationship with the difficult student, seeing the child's disruptive and acting-out behavior as a challenge for both the teacher and the student to master, and a rich opportunity to help the student develop more productive ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving. The therapeutic teacher never "gives up" on the difficult student, perseverating in strengthening a mutually trusting relationship while implementing skilled child guidance techniques to help the child. The therapeutic teacher always

uses a solution-oriented language, focusing on the possible and changeable when working with the student, and expressing to the child that...

Change is Possible

And

All Students Can Learn Behavioral Self-Control

Now You Can Develop Therapeutic Teacher Skills

To learn how to cope with stressful or troublesome events, build positive attitudes and effective life skills, and achieve their social and academic goals, schools provide the ideal environment in which classroom teachers and related services personnel with the adequate training can teach psycho-educational skills to children. Teaching psycho-educational skills to students relates directly with the role of schools in preparing children to function effectively and to deal competently with society's demands. When we teach psycho-educational skills to students, we are giving them the ability to understand and self-manage emotions and behavior, and we are assisting them in developing resilience in coping with further troublesome events along the road.

Unfortunately, a great deal of this very much-needed information from the psycho-educational literature never reaches teachers. In this psycho-education skill-building series, we recognize and address this need. Now we can train teachers to resolve students' behavior problems by applying therapeutic techniques based on psycho-educational principles. Grounded in the author's strong psychological and educational background and expertise, the psycho-education skill-building series takes full advantage of current psychological and educational theory and research to train teachers in the child guidance techniques they need to become skillful behavior managers and behavior change promoters.

Thinking and Talking Rationally

Cognitions are ideas expressed through self-talking or self-images (thoughts) that direct the processing of events (perceptions), and ultimately, behavior. According to the *perceptual control theory*, people control perceptions, not actions (Maag, 1998). Cognitive psychology adds that, although we cannot change what happened (the event), we can change the way we think about

what happened; that is, we can change our perception of the event. Other people or situations do not make us feel anything; we make ourselves feel in a particular way when we think about the event in that particular way. If we do not like the way we are feeling, we need to change the way we are thinking about the event. A person can achieve emotional health by learning to think and talk in ways that help the person feel more the way he wants to feel, and feel less the way he does not want to feel (Borcherdt, 1989).

Using *cognitive behavior modification*, therapeutic teachers can train children to generate an internal dialogue that structures their thinking and control their behavior. Through *thought catching* and becoming *thought detectives*, children learn to monitor the things they say to themselves, and to substitute their *irrational beliefs* (angry and self-defeating thoughts and ideas) with rational thinking. The rational-emotive approach (RET) helps children see the link between their thinking and their emotional reactions and behavior. The goal of this training is to teach children how to see themselves accurately, so that when problems are their fault, they take responsibility for it and try to correct their behavior, but when problems are not their fault, they still feel worthwhile (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, and Gillham, 1995).

The cognitive method involves treating children's angry and self-defeating beliefs as hypotheses that can be tested, and then changing the belief when it is proved wrong. This adds D and E to Ellis's *A-B-C Model of Emotions* (Ellis in Ellis and Grieger, 1977). In this model, A is the activating event or experience (what happened or the trigger); B is the belief about the experience (rational and irrational ideas); and C is the emotional (feeling) or behavioral (reward or punishment) consequence. Neither A nor C is the determining factor in how children feel; what matters is what they are thinking or saying to themselves at point B about the activating event and/or the expected consequences. At point D, the irrational thinking is attacked for its veracity; that is, D is the disputation of the belief (B), or the argument the student makes to counter the belief. When the child disputes the belief at point D, he winds up with a new effect or philosophy (E); that is, the child develops a new way of thinking (cognitive effect), feeling (emotive effect), and behaving (behavioral effect). This new, rational thinking aligns with emotional health and improved behavior.

The rational-emotive approach helps troubled, anger-prone, and behaviorally disordered children understand how their emotions relate to their behavior, making explicit the direct connection

between what they believe to be true and how they behave. Cognitive-emotive interventions are designed to help students see the link between what they think and how they feel. Children learn that what they believe about themselves, others, and their environment directly influences their behavior. Using rational-emotive techniques and interventions, troubled, angry, and acting-out students learn that controlling their thoughts is the way to emotional and behavioral self-control.

Irrational Beliefs

RET helps students understand the difference between a *preference* or a *desire* (e.g., “I would like to have that video game,”) and a *demand* (“I must have that video game”). By turning their preferences into demands, students fall prey of their own *irrational thinking*, which according to the RET philosophy, is the source of all frustration, anger, and emotional disturbance. Ellis (in Ellis and Grieger, 1977), identifies the four basic forms of an irrational belief:

Basic Form 1: The child thinks someone or something should or must be different from the way it actually does exist.

Basic Form 2: The child finds it is awful, terrible, or horrible when it is this way.

Basic Form 3: The child thinks he cannot bear, stand, or tolerate the person or thing that should not be this way.

Basic Form 4: The child thinks that himself, or the other person, have made or keep making something terrible, and because of this (the child or the other person) deserves condemnation and does not deserve anything good in life. Consequently, the child gives himself or the other person a negative label like lousy, jerk, or rotten.

Ellis defines *irrationality* as any thought, emotion, or behavior that leads to self-defeating or self-destructive consequences. Irrational thinking interferes with the ability to get along well with others. According to RET, irrational thinking stems from:

-Demands like *must* and *must not*; *should* and *should not*. We make a demand when we believe and consider an obligation that the world, other people, or both world and other people are different. Examples would be,

---The world should be fair and just.

---Others should treat me the way I want.

---Others must be nice, kind, and considerate to me. If they are not, it is my right to blame and condemn them.

---I must be liked by everybody.

---I must be loved and accepted.

---People must approve what I do. If they do not, it is because (they are bad or I am rotten).

---I must excel at everything that I do.

---I must get what I want quickly and easily.

---I must not get frustrated.

---I must not get anything of what I do not want.

-Exaggerating by magnifying the significance of what happened. The negative event is turned into a catastrophe; examples,

---This is the worst day of my life.

---It is terrible, horrible, and awful that things do not go my way.

---If I do not get that video game, I will just die.

Teachers can identify students' exaggerations when we hear in their sentences words like *always* (e.g., "I am always messing up") or *never* ("I will never learn this stuff"); *everyone* ("Everyone hates me!") or *nobody* ("Nobody likes me").

-Distorting and **filtering the event**; for example, "Drake is only saying that I should expand my essay's summary because he is jealous of me," or "I had a bad grade because Mr. Evans hates me."

-Externalizing by believing that external circumstances (environment or other people) are the cause of our anger and unhappiness. Examples would be,

---Theresa made me angry.

---They are so unfair to me.

---Everyone is against me.

---Mr. Evans always blames me.

---I had a low grade because the math test was too hard.

---She is always doing that to me.

-Denying responsibility; for example,

---It is not my fault.

---Deon started it.

---I cannot help it. That is just my temper.

---I just have bad luck.

-Self-judging; for example,

---I am just a failure.

---I can never do anything right.

---The other kids think I am stupid.

---I am always wrong.

---I stink!

---I am the worst dancer.

---I am a loser.

---I am going to do awful.

Helping Children to Think Rationally

To develop *rational thinking*, Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, and Gillham (1995) advice children to use clues and to find the evidence for the negative and self-defeating belief using the following steps:

Step 1: *Thought catching*; that is, being aware of the irrational beliefs at the times the child feels worst.

Step 2: Evaluating the thought by acknowledging that it is not necessarily true and accurate, and seeing the belief about herself and/or the world as a hypothesis that needs to be tested.

Step 3: Generating a more accurate explanation about the negative event and using that explanation to challenge the irrational thought.

Step 4: *Decatastrophizing* by redirecting the child's energy away from feeling sorry, troubled, or angry about the event and toward solving the problem.

As Seligman et al. say, there is a difference between thinking that a bad event cannot be changed and it is going to last forever, and thinking that we can change at least part of the negative event or our feelings about the event. Rational-emotive thinking or RET helps children see stressful and troubling events as problems to be solved as opposed to personal threats.

Prompting the Student

Bernard and Joyce (1984, p. 195) recommend using the following prompts to help the student clarify the irrational ideas or beliefs (B) that trigger a particular emotion or behavior:

- What were you thinking when _____ happened?
- What sorts of things were you saying to yourself when...?
- What name did you call Ricky when...?
- Tell me the first thing that comes into your mind when you think about _____.
- Picture yourself back in the classroom; what did you think when...?

The Disputation Technique

In RET, the goal is not to change A (to make the negative event disappear), but to change the student's reaction to the event, so that the child learns to accept what happened and tries to change only the parts that can be changed. Rather than spending time discussing A (the activating event), the RET teacher intervenes at the B level or beliefs. Zions (1996) recommends asking the student, "What if it is true? What is the worst thing that can happen?" Alternatively, we can ask, "Assume that you are never going to _____. Why is that so awful?" The objective of this kind of disputation is to show the student that although the event is uncomfortable, it is probably not terrible, and the child can stand it. When using a RET approach, the teacher needs to be careful to allow the student to dispute his own errors in thinking (*self-disputation*) before the teacher does.

When disputing an irrational belief, the child identifies the way he is evaluating the event and the things he is saying to himself that are causing him to feel angry or upset. Zions advises teachers not to ask, "How this situation makes you feel?" (external attribution) but to ask the child, "How do you feel about this situation?" The first question blames the event for the child's feelings; the second question implies that the student is responsible for his feelings and reactions. In addition, you can ask, "What was going through your mind that caused you to feel this way?"

Through disputation, the child answers primarily two kinds of questions: *evidence-gathering questions* (evidence supporting or against the belief) and *alternative interpretation questions* (what are other ways of seeing this problem). Disputing a negative or irrational belief means answering questions like:

-What evidence supports my belief? Alternatively, where is the evidence for my belief?

-In which way my belief is true or false.

-Do I base my belief on fact, opinion, or inference?

-How am I exaggerating this situation?

-Is this really terrible and awful, or only annoying?

-Is this something that I cannot tolerate? In what manner cannot I?

Answering questions like these help the student in identifying the thoughts or irrational beliefs that are troubling him. The therapeutic teacher challenges the student to prove his belief; for instance, “What can you do to test your belief?” The two key questions to ask a student to dispute and challenge the child’s irrational belief are:

-What is the evidence that this belief is true? And,

-What is another way to see this situation?

Another technique used in the disputation process is ***debating***. Once the child identifies the ideas that led to emotional upset, the next step is to challenge the irrational thinking through a debate. The cognitive technique used to debate is called *rational analysis of the belief*, a forceful dialogue between the rational and irrational ideas to determine if the belief makes sense. The student answers a set of “why” questions similar to these ones:

-Why must she be the way you want?

-Why must she agree with you?

-Why do you have to like what she did/said?

-Why must Jonathan be nice to you? Why cannot he be “not nice”?

-Why do you have to “get even” on him?

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