

One Approach to the Treatment of Troubled and Troublesome Youths An Introduction to the Pressley Ridge Approach

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Talking Points

Objectives:

- Identify the four preconditions for successful behavior change.
- Describe and give examples of the four major types of treatment interventions used at Pressley Ridge.
- Describe an advantage and disadvantage of each of the four major types of treatment interventions.
- List and briefly describe the kinds of questions used in teaching thinking skills.
- Given an analysis of the function(s) a specified behavior serves, be able to design a comprehensive intervention plan that includes the four major treatment interventions.

Preconditions for Behavior Change

Relationship

Positive relationships with the people involved.

Commitment to collaborative effort

Assessment

A clear and complete description of the behavior(s) to be changed – the goal.

An understanding of the functions the behavior serves from a Learning Theory perspective

- We talked about how critical **relationships** are as a precondition to helping kids and families.
 - We talked about the importance of relationship building skills in Unit 8.
 - We talked about the critical nature of establishing a collaborative effort with parents in Unit 4, with other agencies in Unit 7, and about how to resolve conflicts in Unit 9.
- We talked about how critical **assessment** is as a precondition to helping kids and families.
 - We talked a great deal about describing the target behavior in Unit 10.
 - We spent all of Unit 11 looking at the importance of understanding the triggering events, the setting events and the consequences for the target behavior; and – when they are all put together – identifying the functions of the target behavior from a Learning Theory perspective.

- If you have done a good job in those areas, designing an effective intervention is generally not a difficult process.
- Most interventions fail, not because they are bad interventions, but because one or more of the **relationship** or **assessment** preconditions have not been met.

One Approach to Treatment

- Nearly all textbooks, workshops, and trainings that teach professionals how to treat children's behavior problems focus on teaching the participants about a series of treatment techniques or procedures. These typically include procedures like timeout, point systems, praise, response cost, extinction, social skills, etc.
- But with two exceptions, you're not going to learn about any techniques today.
- It's not because we don't believe in techniques. On the contrary, we use techniques like the ones mentioned above all of the time.
- There is nothing wrong with any of the procedures in themselves. But there is often a problem with the way they are applied in practice. The problem is that they are frequently used in the absence of a clear understanding of the functions of the behavior being treated.
- That is, they are often used with children and families without an adequate functional assessment and without appreciation of the family members' unique characteristics and situations.
- Or they are used without an adequate relationship as the foundation of helping.
- Not surprisingly, when used that way, they often fail.
- Instead of teaching you a series of techniques, our goal is to teach you how to understand the nature of the problem behavior you are targeting.
- When you have a clear understanding of the functions of the target behavior, you will be able to design techniques to solve the problem on your own.
- So when we talk about designing treatment interventions, we will not be talking about how to figure out which textbook techniques to apply, we will be talking about designing interventions that respond directly to the information you have gathered regarding the functions the target behavior serves.

Support

Targeting antecedent conditions

Motivation

Targeting consequence conditions

Re-Education

Teaching action skills

Teaching thinking skills

- Given this approach, our discussion of treatment will not focus on a series of techniques. Rather, it will be organized according to whether our interventions target changes in the existing antecedent or consequent conditions, or whether they target teaching of action skills or thinking skills.
- We have organized these treatment interventions into categories:
- Supportive interventions
 - Interventions that target the antecedent conditions of behavior. These are the triggering events and setting events we discussed in Unit 11, or a category of strategies known as prompting;
- Motivational strategies
 - Treatment that targets consequent conditions; and
- Re-education strategies. There are two re-education strategies that we will cover:
 - Strategies that teach action skills, and
 - Strategies that teach thinking skills.

Supportive interventions: Targeting antecedents

- Treatment that targets antecedent conditions consists of designing interventions that alter the triggering and setting events that “set the occasion for” the problematic behavior.
- Antecedent interventions are usually designed either:
 - To prevent problem behaviors from occurring (*by eliminating the antecedent events that produce them*); or
 - To make desired alternative behaviors more likely (*by providing prompts or other antecedent events that produce them*).
- Examples of antecedent interventions include:
 - Modifying demands (*e.g., time, amount, type*)
 - Providing prompts, cues and reminders
 - Using staff proximity
 - Changing staffing patterns
 - Increasing structure during transitions
 - Adding frequent reminders/questions about expectations
 - Changing the schedule or routine
 - Altering the physical environment(*e.g., seating arrangement*)
 - Changing roommates
 - Brief coaching just prior to difficult situations
 - Allowing time to calm down after difficult or strenuous activities
 - Increasing child choices/control
 - Increasing activities/options available
- Antecedent interventions are **supportive strategies** because:
 - They are useful as a means to proactively dodge or put off crises, or other intense problems that a child may not be ready to deal with effectively, thereby providing opportunities to teach other effective skills, to build relationships, and to bring calm to a child who may have been in an extended period of crisis; or
 - They *prompt* the desired alternative behaviors that otherwise would not occur without the prompts.

- Unfortunately, the effectiveness of antecedent interventions is generally limited to only those situations in which we, as helpers, are present and can carefully control the antecedents. In other words, they do not generally produce important **enduring** behavioral changes outside the treatment setting.
- Another disadvantage is that supportive strategies end up making a child or family **dependent** on helpers to solve their problems. We may initially use supportive strategies to facilitate treatment, but we need to maintain our focus on helping kids and families become independent of helpers by teaching them effective life skills.

Motivation strategies: Targeting consequences

- Treatment that targets consequent conditions consists of designing interventions that modify the consequences of the targeted behavior(s). This can include the addition and/or removal of both reinforcing and punishing consequences.
- Consequence interventions are designed to increase motivation to engage in desired behaviors (*by reinforcing them*) and to decrease motivation to engage in problem behaviors (*by punishing them, usually through the removal of reinforcers*). That's why we classify them as motivation strategies.
- Examples of consequence interventions include:
 - Praise (when used in isolation [*refer to the teaching interaction section*])
 - Reprimands, criticism
 - Access/removal of attention
 - Access/removal of privileges
 - Access/removal of preferred activities
 - Access/removal of free time
 - Increase/reduction in demands
 - Behavior management/motivation (*point*) systems
 - Behavioral contracting
 - Timeout
 - Consequence interventions work most effectively:
 - When the consequences are important to the child (i.e., powerful),
 - When they are delivered immediately and consistently,
 - When competing reinforcers/punishers can be controlled (e.g., peer reinforcement), and
 - When motivation, not skill, is the primary issue
- Consequence interventions are best used to increase motivation to learn new and/or difficult skills. There is a short article included, [*Does Praise Help or Harm?*](#), that will help you understand this point.
- Unless used in combination with antecedent and skill teaching strategies, consequence interventions will be of limited effectiveness and will have a tendency to become overwhelmingly punitive, or result in coercive interaction cycles.
- Another disadvantage is that kids do not like other people “controlling them” and people who have control over consequences are viewed as “controlling,” even when the consequences are reinforcers. For this reason, motivation strategies can also motivate kids to “get away from you” or avoid you. While they may be more independent of you, you will not have the opportunities to teach them the skills that will ultimately benefit them.

Re-education strategies: Teaching Action Skills

- Treatment interventions that focus on teaching action skills are designed to teach children and family members needed skills. When we speak of action skills we mean any action, expression, gesture, or statement in which a person engages, and that produces some effect in his or her world. (Later we will differentiate between action skills and thinking skills.)
- Most often the action skills important to the kids and families we serve are social skills. Most of our kids' problems occur because of a lack of social competence. There is another short article included, *The Gaining of Competence* by Nick Hobbs, that will help you understand the importance of helping kids gain competence in social skills and other valued life skills.
- Another common category of action skills for kids in out-of-home placements is life skills (*e.g., money management skills, academic skills, workplace skills, etc.*)
- The action skills taught typically are:
 - Replacement behaviors, or “functionally equivalent” behaviors that will accomplish the same function as the problem behavior identified as our *raison d'être* (*e.g., get teacher attention by appropriately asking for it instead of acting out*).
 - Skills in areas not directly related to problem behavior, but which alter the setting conditions that often result in problems (*e.g., teaching recreational skills to a child who is frequently bored*).
- Examples of actions skills to teach:
 - Communication/conversation skills
 - Joining a group
 - Getting someone's attention without interrupting
 - Asking questions
 - Listening
 - Hygiene
 - Asking for help
 - Study skills
 - Taking turns/sharing
 - Learning a hobby
 - Disagreeing with adults
 - Recreation skills
 - Independent living skills
 - Work readiness skills
- For skill teaching interventions to be effective:
 - Teach skills that really work in the child's and family's lives.
 - Take advantage of naturally occurring teaching opportunities, or teachable moments;
 - Proactively plan for and schedule teaching moments.
 - Consistently reinforce us of the new skills in everyday situation.
 - Include antecedent and consequent strategies to decrease the targeted problem behavior and motivate the use of the new skills.

- Skill teaching interventions have the advantage that, once the skills are learned, they become part of the person’s behavioral repertoire. That is, they do not require staff or program involvement to be maintained over time or to be used in a wide range of settings. Kids and families gain independence in their lives, and independence of helpers.
- The disadvantage of skill teaching interventions is that they do not produce immediate results. But, then, nothing produces immediate AND lasting results! It takes time to learn a skill and to become comfortable using it. As such, it is important to use this technique in combination with other treatment interventions.

Steps in teaching action skills

Steps in Teaching Action Skills	
A Teaching Interaction	“Give a man a fish, and he’ll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he’ll eat for a lifetime.”
Start with praise for an appropriate behavior , or an empathic statement	“You can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar.” And “A word of encouragement during a failure is worth More than an hour of praise after success.”
Describe the unwanted behavior	“Hate the sin, love the sinner.”
Describe the action skill	“Tell me all. Tell me now.”
Provide a rationale	“Teaching is lighting a fire, not filling a bucket.”
Model-practice-feedback	“A picture is worth a thousand words.” “Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.”
Provide consequences	“Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends.”

- Remember, at the beginning of today’s unit we said we would be learning only two treatment techniques. Those techniques are two styles of **therapeutic teaching interactions**. Anytime you interact with a child, you are teaching whether you intend to or not. M. Russell Ballard said, “*I believe that every human soul is teaching something to someone nearly every minute here in mortality.*” To help troubled and troublesome kids learn action skills, we use specially designed therapeutic teaching interactions.

- **A therapeutic teaching interaction to teach action skills** is really a quite simple set of steps. The purpose of using the steps in a structured interaction is to maximize your ability to teach a troubled or troublesome child a critical skill, often at times when the child is not receptive. Keep in mind this ancient Chinese proverb, *“Give a man a fish, and he’ll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he’ll eat for a lifetime.”*
- What follows are the steps, or discrete components of a teaching interaction to teach action skills. Later we will go over how you can put the steps together in different combinations to deal with different situations.;
 - **Start with praise for an appropriate behavior, OR an empathic statement.** It is important to start a teaching interaction on a positive note.
 - You are more likely to get a child’s attention and not be viewed as being “always critical.”
 - You also can teach a child to discriminate between what the child has done that is good and what is undesired.
 - Remember these two well-known expressions: *“You can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar.”* And *“A word of encouragement during a failure is worth more than an hour of praise after success.”*
 - **Describe the unwanted behavior.** When you are correcting a child, you will need to describe in matter-of-fact detail – not sarcastically or in a lecturing manner – the behavior that is problematic.
 - Kids have said that they want to know exactly what they did wrong so they know exactly what part of everything they are doing is the problem.
 - As the saying goes, *“Hate the sin, love the sinner.”*
 - **Describe the action skills.** Describe the replacement action skill in detail.
 - For social skills, this is often more difficult than it looks. For example, what is the right way to get the attention of two adults who are talking to each other? To effectively teach a skill, you have to be very precise about what the child is supposed to do.
 - Kids have said that they want to know exactly what to do; and that adults tend to be too general or vague because they don’t really know what they want kids to do . . . only what they want them to stop doing.
 - **Provide a rationale.** Make the case that it is in the child’s best interest to use the alternative behavior as opposed to the undesired one.
 - Describe how the alternative behavior will result in better outcomes for that child. Otherwise, why should he or she bother?
 - A good rationale is specifically tailored to each child’s unique experiences and circumstances.
 - There is a short article included titled, [*Rationales take on Rationalizations*](#), that may help you understand this point.
 - **Model-practice-feedback.** This is where you actually help the youth master the action skill.
 - Show the child exactly what the behavior looks like and then talk about each of its major components. Remember that, *“a picture is worth a thousand words”*.
 - Be sure to engage the child in plenty of practice right on the spot. Unless the behavior is learned well and is fairly automatic, it will not be

transferable to everyday situations when you are not there. There's another old Chinese saying, "Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand".

- Give the child positive and corrective feedback following each attempt at practicing the behavior. Be overwhelmingly positive and gradually shape the behavior until it has been mastered at an acceptable level.
- Try to end the whole interaction on a positive note so that you have "sandwiched" your corrective feedback between a positive at the start and a positive at the end. This makes the whole interaction "go down easier."
- **Provide consequences.** When motivation is an issue for a child, provide specific consequences for the unwanted behavior, as well as for the child's active participation in the practice.
 - Consequences are most important when learning new skills or mastering difficult skills.
 - Many of our programs use motivation systems to provide consequences, but there are other strategies that we discussed earlier.

Different teaching interactions for different purposes

Different Teaching Interactions for Different Purposes	
Interaction	Useful Steps
Proactive Teaching	Praise Describe the action skill Provide a rationale Model-practice-feedback Provide a consequence
Social Reward	Praise Describe the action skill Provide a rationale
Corrective Teaching	Praise or empathy Describe the unwanted behavior Describe the action skill Provide a rationale Model-practice-feedback Provide consequences

- The discrete steps can be put together in different combinations for different purposes:
 - **Proactive teaching.** You can conduct several proactive and planned brief training sessions on the skill to help a youth master the skill prior to actually needing to use it.

- The steps to include would be to start with **praise, describe the action skill, provide a rationale**, engage in the **model-practice-feedback** cycle, and **provide consequences** for cooperation if you are using a motivation system.
 - This is probably the most critical teaching that you can provide.
- **Social reward.** Take advantage of times when the action skill spontaneously occurs to praise a youth. “*Catch em’ being good*” as the saying goes.
 - The steps to use are initial praise, and description of the action skill. If the youth seemed hesitant or looks unsure, you could also include the rationale.
 - The more often you can find opportunities to praise kids, the better your relationship will be, the more you will be liked, and your corrective teaching (described next) will be better accepted.
- **Corrective teaching.** When you catch a youth engaging in the unwanted behavior, you would use all of the steps in the sequence shown in the box and in the handouts to correct a youth.

VIDEO: Steps in teaching action skills

The brief video tape shows some examples of action skill teaching that follow the steps outlined above. Let’s watch the video and then discuss and debrief on what we saw.

Teaching thinking skills

- Treatment interventions that focus on teaching thinking skills are designed to teach children and family members the cognitive skills that we generally talk about as “thinking through a problem.” In Unit 9, we presented the SODAS model of steps for problem solving. This is one way to “think through a problem.”
- Another critical thinking skill is “self-control” or “self-regulation.” While working with troubled kids you will probably need to help kids through their personal crises. Self-regulation thinking skills are one set of skills that help kids control themselves during personal crises. You will also learn how to conduct a **Life Space Intervention** with kids. In general, you will be learning in more depth how to teach kids how to think through their problems, and how to maintain self-control and constructively think through a crisis. You will be using the therapeutic teaching skills presented here.
- A third broad category of valuable thinking skills includes helping kids cope with difficult but unavoidable life situations (e.g., parents separating, or a death). These are situations that kids can’t change, but must be able to reckon with.
- Examples of thinking skills to teach:
 - Problem solving (like SODAS)
 - Critical reasoning (self-questioning one’s own reasoning)
 - Hypothesis testing (e.g., “what will happen if I do such-and-such”_
 - Anger management
 - Analyzing negative thoughts (e.g., “when I think like this I get myself worked up”)
 - Critical self-dialogue (taking two different perspectives)
 - Constructive grieving

- The advantage of learning thinking skills is that, once the skills are learned, they become general problem solving skills that can help a child figure out effective strategies in new life situations. You don't have to teach the child every possible response to every possible problem or crisis he or she will encounter in life.
- The disadvantage of teaching thinking skills is that the teaching is highly individualized based on each child's own unique life experiences which you will not be totally aware of. It also requires a teacher's expertise in helping a child become relaxed enough during a stressful event to "think rationally." Often kids are highly invested in their patterns of negative, destructive thinking, and it is difficult to effect a change.
- Another even more important advantage is that thinking skills are not useful to a child who has not learned the action skills that become the solutions of "thinking through a problem." In other words, many traditional styles of counseling and therapy are designed to change patterns of thinking (e.g., improving a child's self-esteem) on the assumption that once thinking changes, kids will somehow figure out more effective action skills. There is little evidence that this approach (change thinking to change actions) works for kids. They need to learn the action skills first. And with experiencing competence comes self-esteem. The short article titled, *The Gaining of Competence* by Nick Hobbs, also addressed this issue.
- When first starting to teach a child thinking skills, use lots of **proactive teaching** to help the child master the basic skills (like the SODAS steps).
- Once a child has mastered the basic steps, teaching the child to use those steps in every day situations, or during crises, is best accomplished through **Socratic questioning**, a style of teaching in which questions are used to prompt a child to "think out loud" and "think through a problem to a personally acceptable solution."
 - Socratic questioning is derived from the teaching style developed by the Greek philosopher, Socrates.
 - The goal of Socratic questioning is to facilitate a child's thinking by presenting the child with probing questions, and following all answers with further questions, and be selecting questions which move the child's thinking along toward a conclusion fitting for the child.
 - The goal is NOT to lead the child to your way of thinking.
 - It is questioning aimed at increasing kids' abilities to think through problems, conflicts, and crises. The questioning helps kids to slow down their thinking and engage in constructive thinking steps (like stating the problem, stating options, stating advantages and disadvantages of each option, and picking a solution [SODAS]).
 - The solutions need to be the child's own personal solutions.
 - The general style or quality of the teacher's interaction is one of the humble inquirer and doubter, rather than the prosecuting attorney. Tact, wisdom, humility, and patience are critical. The teacher facilitates, clarifies, summarizes, probes, and moves the kid's thinking along through the use of questions that model an enquiring mind."

Kinds of questions that teach thinking skills

- A therapeutic interaction to teach thinking skills is:
 - A sequence of questions,
 - Punctuated with praise for engaging in the process,
 - And an occasional rationale for why such thinking will benefit the child.

- The following are the kinds of questions that help kids think through problems:
 - Questions of clarification and problem articulation.
 - These are questions similar to the questions for clarification covered in Unit 8 on active listening. They are questions and statements like, “what do you mean by such-and-such,” or “tell me more about such-and-such.” They are questions meant to draw out what the child is thinking and feeling. The questions are meant to help you understand the youth’s situation.

Another Kind of Teaching Interaction

Questions

- Questions of clarification
- Questions that probe problem articulation
- Questions that probe assumptions and personal values
- Questions that probe reasons and evidence
- Questions about viewpoints or perspectives
- Questions that probe implications and consequences

Provide praise for engaging in constructive thinking, and for new/creative ideas and insights

Provide a rationale for engaging in constructive thinking

- Questions that probe problem articulation
 - In this case we mean questions like, “What do you think is the main problem here?” or “Why do you think that such-and-such is the problem?”
- Questions that probe assumptions and personal values
 - These are questions like, “Why do you think that’s the case?” or “Why do you think she said such-and-such to you?” or “You seem to be assuming such-and-such. Why do you think that’s a good assumption?”
- Questions that probe reasons and evidence
 - These are questions like, “What happened that makes you think that?” or “Can you describe your reasons for thinking that?” or “How do you know?” or “What would convince you otherwise?”
- Questions about viewpoints or perspectives
 - “How do you think the other kid feels when you do such-and-such?” or “How would you feel if someone called you such-and-such?” or “What would someone who disagrees say?”
- Questions that probe implications and consequences

- “So what do you think would happen if you pick that option?” or “What has he done in the past when someone did such-and-such to him?”
- Some guidelines to follow when using Socratic questioning are:
 - Give kids “thinking time” or “wait time” after asking a question. If there is now answer even after waiting a bit, don’t answer your own question. Ask another, simpler question, or focus on a different aspect of the problem.
 - Move from simple, non-confrontative questions, to ones that require more thought or are more challenging for the youth. Avoid questions that need only yes/no answers. Don’t insult kids by asking questions that are too confrontative at the moment.
 - Ask only one question at a time,
 - Model a style of “curious enquiry” because you are modeling a style for the child of looking critically at his or her own thinking. You are not imposing your judgment on the child.
 - Praise the youth’s cooperation and effort in the process, and/or be empathic with the difficulty of thinking aloud about a difficult problem. Avoid praising the youth’s choices, decisions, and conclusions because you won’t be teaching independent thinking, but “thinking like you think.” The goal is to teach critical introspection skills, which most likely will not be “the way you see it.”
 - Occasionally provide a rationale for how the youth will eventually benefit from engaging in problem solving or critical thinking.
 - There is a short article included titled, [*A Taxonomy of Socratic Questions*](#), that provides many more examples for you.

VIDEO: Teaching Thinking Skills

This video tape shows a well-known child psychologist, Nick Long, demonstrating Socratic questioning as part of a life space interview. Watch carefully and look for examples of questions that clarify the child’s thinking and move his thinking along in a constructive, problem solving manner.

ACTIVITY: Designing a comprehensive intervention plan

Break into small groups. Design a comprehensive treatment intervention targeting aggression for Julia, the child observed in the video tape for units 10 and 11. Your intervention should briefly describe an antecedent intervention that is supportive, a consequence intervention to motivate Julia, a teaching intervention to teach action skills, and a teaching intervention to teach thinking skills.
