

# “What Are They Thinking?”

**Cognitive-behavioral interventions with at-risk youth.** by Steve Parese, Ed.D. (2013)

**SUMMARY:** This article explores two reasons why many at-risk youth engage in and justify criminal behavior. It first establishes a rationale for cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBI). Next, it delves into cognitive skills training, a CBI approach to help youth gain “new tools” such as self-control skills, social skills, and problem-solving skills. Finally, it explores cognitive restructuring, a CBI approach used to teach “new rules” by challenging the false logic that at-risk youth use to justify their actions, even in the face of serious consequences.

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## Introduction

In 2010, more than 92,000 young men and women under the age of 18 were incarcerated in the U.S. juvenile justice system. While this number represents a significant decline from the mid-1990's, it does not take into account the number of youth, some as young as 14 years of age, who have been tried as adults and committed to adult facilities. Numerous studies suggest that incarceration with adults places youth at significant risk of physical and sexual assault, rape, and suicide. Rather than acting as a deterrent to future crime, such conditions may actually prepare young offenders for a lifetime of violence and criminality.

A well-established body of research suggests that punitive interventions such as boot camps and punishment- or control-oriented programs have been largely ineffective in reducing juvenile and adult recidivism. Nor have self-esteem building programs or traditional non-directive psycho-therapeutic interventions been effective. If tougher sentencing and gentler therapies do not lead to the rehabilitation of criminals, what does work?

## Predicting criminality and recidivism

Paul Gendreau, a Canadian researcher who has written extensively on correctional interventions, has identified a number of “criminogenic needs,” factors which are closely associated with criminality and recidivism and can be impacted with intervention.

These include:

- Antisocial, procriminal attitudes and values
- Antisocial friends / isolation from prosocial peers
- Family dysfunction
- Poor self-control and problem-solving skills
- Substance abuse
- Lack of employment/employment skills

Several of these factors are best addressed using cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBI), an approach which has two decades of evidence behind it. Generally speaking, CBI can be divided into: (1) Cognitive skills training, which teaches youth new prosocial skills needed to handle social situations without resorting to violence or manipulation; and (2) Cognitive restructuring, which benignly challenges the antisocial attitudes they use to justify their criminal behavior.

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**Cognitive skills training teaches youth new prosocial skills to handle challenging social situations. Cognitive restructuring challenges the antisocial attitudes they use to justify their criminal behavior.**

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## CBI Approach 1: Cognitive Skills Training

Cognitive skills training is a process which helps individuals acquire new “tools” or intra/interpersonal skills, for handling challenging situations.

Many troubled youth have learned survival skills required for day-to-day living in harsh urban or rural environments, especially when surrounded by substance use, mental illness, criminality and poverty. However, the prosocial skills commonly taught to children from middle class families have seldom been modeled for them. Without the interpersonal skills needed to succeed in education or employment settings, these youth may find it difficult to complete school or keep a good job.

“The Prepare Curriculum” (Goldstein, 1999) describes over 100 skills needed by adolescents for personal and interpersonal success. Examples of these include:

1. Social skills, such as starting conversations and giving compliments;
2. Skills for dealing with stress, such as controlling one’s anger and dealing with accusations;
3. Skills for understanding feelings, such as expressing one’s feelings to others, and dealing with others’ anger; and
4. Planning skills, such as identifying the problem and setting a goal.

Cognitive skills cannot be taught in the same way that most academic skills are traditionally taught, through lecture and discussion. Instead, cognitive skills instruction should follow a 5-step process that includes dramatic demonstrations and realistic role-playing, in much the way that we might teach an anxious teenager to drive a car.



Step 1. Describe the skill: Break the skill into simple steps, and provide a clear rationale for learning it.

If you were teaching a teen to drive a car with a standard transmission, you might begin by clearly explaining, step by step, how the gas, brake, and clutch pedals work together to power a vehicle. When teaching cognitive skills, we often begin by describing the importance of a skill, and explaining it in a short series of clear steps.

Typically, some of these steps may be behavioral and others may be cognitive. For example, the steps of listening as described by Goldstein (1999) are:

- a. Look at the other person (behavioral)
- b. Think about what they are saying (cognitive)
- c. Nod to show you are listening (behavioral)
- d. Repeat back what you heard (behavioral)
- e. Think about what you want to say in return (cognitive)

Step 2. Demonstrate the skill: Provide a dramatic instructor demonstration of the skill in a realistic classroom situation.

In the driving example, you might get behind the wheel, and with your teen in the passenger seat, slowly and clearly demonstrate the interplay of the gas, brake, and clutch pedals. When teaching cognitive skills, the next step is to accurately model the steps of the new skill in a scenario our students can easily relate to, such as having to listen to a principal or parent giving instructions for an unpleasant task.

Step 3. Role play the skill: Guide student skill practice in personally relevant and realistic classroom role plays.

If we were teaching driving skills, step 3 would be to climb into the passenger seat and allow our teen to slowly drive the car around an empty parking lot. When teaching a cognitive skill such as listening, we would create a number of concrete scenarios and encourage our students to role play being a good listener using the steps described and modeled earlier.

Step 4. Coach the skill: Provide feedback and coaching from peers and instructors during or after the role play.

When our new driver anxiously grinds the clutch or causes the car to lurch forward, we provide timely and encouraging guidance, correcting and praising them as needed. Similarly, when students become overwhelmed and make mistakes while role playing skills such as listening, we can act as a movie director: "Cut!" the scene, solicit suggestions from peers and offer our own, then try a "Take 2!"

Step 5. Practice the skill: Assign skill practice in real life situations, and discuss these attempts in later sessions.

As your teen's driving skills and confidence improve, you would allow him/her to practice driving on back streets and country roads, eventually moving to busier streets and highways with less and less supervision. When teaching cognitive skills, we give our students "homework assignments" to practice their skills outside of class, and to report back to the group later on their success or failure.

*In summary, youthful offenders have often never learned the prosocial skills that are necessary to manage social situations without manipulation and/or violence. Cognitive skills instruction teaches new "tools," skills such as self-control, effective communication, and problem-solving through a dynamic process of demonstration and role-playing.*

### **CBI Approach 2: Cognitive Restructuring**

As noted earlier, the top predictors of criminality and recidivism are antisocial thinking, values, and attitudes. Cognitive restructuring is a subtle process which challenges such antisocial reasoning and helps individuals develop new "rules" for judging challenging situations.

Troubled youth who grow up in harsh environs have often learned both survival skills and survival attitudes as well. They have learned to explain, rationalize, or justify their behavior in ways that allow them to avoid guilt, shame or remorse. Unless this mindset changes, unless new rules are adopted, youth are unlikely to utilize new tools they are taught.

"The EQUIP Program" (Gibbs, Potter, and Goldstein, 1995) describes four common antisocial distortions used to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions. These include:

1. Self-Centeredness: Seeing your own views, expectations, needs, rights, and feelings as so important that the legitimate needs or views of others are disregarded.

*For example, a youth might claim:*

"Rules are meant for other people, not for me."

"You got to look out for yourself. No one else will."

2. Blaming Others: Putting blame for your harmful actions onto another person, group, or a bad mood, or seeing yourself as the victim of misfortune.

*For example, a youth might state:*

"It's not my fault he got hurt. He should have been watching where he was going."

"Give me a break! I was having a bad day -- what do you want?"

3. Minimizing or Mislabeled: Understating the seriousness of your behavior, or referring to others with belittling or dehumanizing labels.

*For example, youth may say:*

"It wasn't that bad. I could have broken his nose and all I did was push him."

"Why should I feel bad? Everyone knows she's nothing but a @\$%-ing whore."

4. Assuming the Worst: Attributing hostile intentions to others, fixating on negative outcomes, or assuming that any improvement is impossible.

*For example, a youth might insist:*

"I saw the way she looked at me. She was getting ready to bust on me, so I did what I had to do."

"I'll @\$% up regardless, so why put in the effort? It's hopeless. I'm just like my father."

These distorted thinking patterns are often so well-established and so self-fulfilling that traditional punishment-oriented interventions may actually serve to reinforce rather than change them. Effectively challenging these patterns requires subtlety and skill.

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One useful cognitive restructuring technique is called benign confrontation, a counseling process which leads youth to an uncomfortable level of self-awareness regarding their self-serving justifications.

While it is impossible to sufficiently describe this technique in a brief article, the key points and some illustrative examples are offered below.

Step 1. Listen non-judgmentally to the story to find the distorted reasoning. Encourage the youth to describe both what happened and to explain his underlying reasoning. Avoid any condemnation of his actions or justifications.

Step 2. Summarize the core belief or justification, almost as if convinced of its logic. Then suddenly change your tone, demeanor, and body language.

Step 3. Challenge the false logic or self-serving justification with a benign confrontation, leaving the youth with a sense of uncertainty. If possible, interrupt his/her come-back with an excuse to momentarily leave the conversation, requiring the youth to reflect on what's been said.

a. Challenge by contrasting the Law of Streets vs Rule of School: Help youth see that what might be acceptable at home or on the streets is NOT acceptable in the school/program.

Alan justifies punching another student over a funny look: "The way I grew up, you don't let somebody look at you like that, or the next time you turn a corner, they might jump you."

Summarize & Challenge: *"I understand that on the streets, you might have to take matters into your own hands. On the streets, there's no one there to protect you, so you have to take care of yourself. But this isn't the street, it's a school. Here in this school, things are different. Here, the staff are paid to keep kids safe, and today you took matters into your own hands instead of letting us do our jobs. You turned a safe school into the dangerous streets. Think on that while I take this quick phone call..."*

b. Challenge with an Appeal to Character: Help youth gain empathy by appealing to his better side.

Barry, last year's number one scapegoat, rationalizes bullying a new boy today: "It wasn't that bad, really. I just shook him up a little, trying to teach him a lesson."

Summarize & Challenge: *"I can see that there's a part of you that thinks that what you did to Ricky*

*was no big deal, especially compared to what was done to YOU last year, right? No big deal! But there's another part of you -- a kinder part of you -- that knows exactly what it feels like to be beaten up and pushed around. That kinder boy, he's the one who once stood up for people when they were being teased, who helped out staff when no one else would. That's the young man I've come to respect. Where was that boy today? All I'm hearing right now is a bully, and I know that's not who you REALLY are. Excuse me for a moment, will you? I'll be right back..."*



c. Challenge with an Appeal to Self-Interest: Help the youth see how his choice was not in his own long-term best interest.

Charles lost his cool and punched an aggravating new resident who was deliberately pushing his buttons. Charles lost numerous privileges, but claims: "It was worth it to put that little punk Peter in his place. Now he knows who's in charge. Me!"

Summarize & Challenge: *"So you're saying that it really felt good to teach Peter a lesson. I can see where you got some satisfaction by giving him a black eye after all the aggravation he caused you, but look at all the consequences you have to deal with now! You're confined to your room, you've lost your home visit, and you got dropped a level, extending your stay for at least another month.... all so you could teach one 14-year-old who's the boss? I've always thought you were way too smart to get manipulated into losing your temper that way. No, no... Let me just use the restroom, and we'll talk some more..."*



d. Challenge by Relabeling Behavior: Relabel the youth's antisocial behavior in more accurate terms.

Damon stole a handful of wrenches from the auto shop, and when he was caught, claimed: "I was only borrowing them! Like you've never borrowed anything in your life..."

Summarize & Challenge: "You can say you were only 'borrowing' those tools from the auto tech shop, but we both know what really happened. Mr. Johnson had to leave for a minute, and you took advantage of that moment to walk off with something that wasn't yours. That's not 'borrowing,' it's **STEALING**... and you know it too. You walked away with \$20 worth of tools, and now instead of making it right, you're making excuses. You sold your integrity for \$20... Think about that for a minute."



In summary, many at-risk youth use distorted thinking to justify their antisocial choices, avoiding guilt and remorse for hurtful behavior. Cognitive restructuring offers "new rules" by which to judge the appropriateness of social behavior. By doing so, it creates an uncomfortable level of self-awareness in youth, bringing their thinking to the surface and hopefully motivating behavioral change as well.

### **Closing**

More than 22% of all American children and youth live in poverty-stricken homes, many surrounded by substance use, violence, mental illness, and criminal parents or role models. Under such conditions, some will turn to antisocial behavior and come in contact with the juvenile criminal justice system. Various studies suggest that 50% - 75% of youth in juvenile detention will be later incarcerated as adults, beginning a lifelong cycle of poverty, unemployment and criminality that may be hard to break.

Where punitive interventions often fail to create lasting change, cognitive-behavioral interventions may succeed. Cognitive skills training is especially useful for youth who make poor behavioral choices because they lack the "tools" needed to handle social situations without resorting to violence or manipulation. By teaching these youth skills such as stress management, communication skills, and critical thinking skills, we prepare them for success outside their neighborhoods, especially in educational and employment settings.

A second CBI approach, cognitive restructuring, is especially useful for youth who are adept at finding ways to justify their antisocial choices by blaming others, minimizing their actions, or convincing themselves that they had no choice. When done well, cognitive restructuring techniques such as benign confrontation expose some of these justifications and create opportunities for youth to experience a healthy level of remorse for harmful actions.

### **Resources:**

Gibbs, J. C., Potter, G. H., & Goldstein, A. P. (1995). *The EQUIP Program: Teaching Youth to Think and Act Responsibly Through a Peer Helping Approach*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Goldstein, A. P. (1999). *The Prepare Curriculum: Teaching Prosocial Competencies*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Goldstein, A. P. Glick B. & Gibbs, J. (1986). *Aggression Replacement Training: A Comprehensive Intervention for Aggressive Youth*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, IPP - Criminogenic Needs Available online: [http://www.drc.ohio.gov/web/ipp\\_criminogenic.htm](http://www.drc.ohio.gov/web/ipp_criminogenic.htm)

Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., and Kang, W. (2008). *Census of juveniles in residential placement databook*. Available online: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/>

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