

## THINK RIGHT TO ACT RIGHT

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Behaviour modification programs need an understanding of some of the basic principles and a willingness to persevere. Good communication skills, especially reflective listening, are really important. These programs are based on an understanding that the only person who can change your behaviour is you.

### Background

Each person brings to every situation a background of experiences, learning and relationships and a set of basic human needs for safety, love acceptance. This background determines our concept of self worth and our self-esteem. It establishes our attitudes and values and directs our life goals. In any given situation our feelings and emotions rule and simply telling us what to do has little effect.

### The theory

If behavioural outcomes are to change and feeling and emotions controlled, individuals needs to think differently about themselves, others and situations. Feelings and emotions need to be controlled by rational self-talk. By changing the way we think about a person or situation we can control feelings, change our behaviours and change the outcome of those behaviours.

Example. A student is easily upset and reacts aggressively to taunts by other members of the class resulting in a verbal slanging match and a fight.

The teacher needs to act to stop the students providing the verbal taunts. Stopping the stimulus will help, but the student on the receiving end needs to learn how to deal better with the situation.

The following might be attempted;

1. Help the student to recognise the feeling that have led to the behaviours. He/she will always feel hurt so there is no point telling the child to ignore the taunts or to stop reacting aggressively.
2. Help the student to recognise what they are thinking when the taunts are being made. (I want to get back at them and hurt/hit them.)
3. Help the student to focus on the consequences of their actions of retaliation. (I might get a detention or a letter sent home or, if I hit them hard enough, suspension.)
4. Help the student to focus on what is best for himself/herself. (I'm not going to be sucked in and let these students get me into trouble.)
5. Help the student consider appropriate assertive and avoidance behaviours to deal with the situation.

### Cognitive skills

What we are trying to teach students is cognitive skills of talking sense to themselves. Teachers need to help, even rehearse, the basic questions:

Is what I am going to do going to help me?

What am I thinking?

Is what I am thinking going to help me?

Is it angry (irrational) or is it sensible (rational)?

These questions help the child to establish STOP goals (do not continue with this thought) and START goals (think of the consequences and about a way that will help you).

There are three broad areas that can be worked on to change negative thoughts:

**Consequences** - concentrate on the consequences of continuing to think the way you are and what feelings, behaviours and outcomes will result.

**Calm thoughts** - concentrate on a series of predetermined calm thoughts that have been rehearsed and even written down and kept in a pocket for easy reference. Relax, calm down. Count to 10, it's

not worth it.

**Control and confidence** - keep saying to yourself: I can handle this, I'm not getting sucked into this problem, I've kept my cool before and I can keep it now.

Sometimes cue prompts can help a student when undesired behaviours occur in social situations like the classroom. It might be a look, comment or action that has a predetermined message - you're heading the wrong direction, stop and think about what you are doing.

### **Behaviour targets**

These cognitive skills can be further developed and rehearsed with the teacher for particular areas of difficulty:

**Assertiveness** - being yourself and standing up for your rights. Teaching students to be polite and persistent in seeking what they believe they have a right to is important for all areas of life. This is not about being aggressive (dominating others) or being a wimp (being put down by others).

**Private verses public** - some behaviours are alright at home or in the playground but not the classroom. Some students need careful explanations about these differences to help them modify their behaviours for the situation they are in.

**Situational rehearsal** - students sometimes find particular situations threatening or embarrassing and need help to manage them. Rehearsing what to say and how to react to questions can help. (Similar to rehearsing for job interviews).

**Resisting peer pressure** - saying NO is an important skill for all students for many social situations, especially those associated with risk taking behaviours related to drugs, driving, sex, inappropriate attention. Practicing how to say NO is helpful.

**Organisational checklists** - Some students get into trouble because they are personally disorganised. Assisting students to develop checklists about what they bring to school and how they organise their homework can take away some of the circumstances that cause these students to get into trouble.