Cognitive Supports™ Presents:

**Re-Thinking Challenging Behavior**

Written and Presented by Nate Sheets
FASD and Behavior Consultant
[www.cogsupports.com](http://www.cogsupports.com)
Hosted by Swindells Resource Center

UNDERSTAND/CHANGE LENS
THINK AHEAD
ADJUST EXPECTATIONS
SHIFT APPROACH & ENVIRONMENT
PLAN TOGETHER
“Your explanation guides your intervention.”
– Dr. Ross Greene, “The Explosive Child”

- Punishments
- Rewards
- Lectures
- “Why, why, why?”
- Suspensions
- Displacement
- Arrest

Intentional Skill

- Proactive
- Accommodation
- Think differently
- Empathize
- Learn
- Work together
- Advocate
“Your explanation guides your intervention.”
– Dr. Ross Greene, “The Explosive Child”

When we reframe challenging behaviors, it...

- Makes things easier emotionally
- Allows us to problem solve
- Helps the person understand what’s going on
- Is more accurate than our “gut” feelings
Children learn “acceptable” behaviors when their good behavior is **REINFORCED** and when bad behavior is **PUNISHED**.

When a child or teenager refuses to do something, it’s because they want to be in **CONTROL** or **GET WHAT THEY WANT**.

When children or teens have bad behaviors, it’s a reflection of their **CHARACTER** or their **PARENTS’ abilities**.
Challenging behaviors happen when someone is expected to use **COGNITIVE SKILLS** they do not have or cannot access.

Children and teens want to be successful, but they need supports to do so in a society that misunderstands them.

Skills are learned when expectations, interactions, other situations are appropriately supported.
Research suggests that parents who understand the brain-based reasons for behaviors are more likely to:

- Use proactive strategies
- Feel more successful in their parenting

(Petrenko, Pandolfino, Roddenbery)
How Nate Thinks (Brace yourselves!)

“I am the parent/adult!” is bogus

Is this your current approach/value/worldview? What would change if you shifted from compliance to collaboration, like you would with an adult?
Traditional Strategies and Cognitive Skills

Making a verbal plan with alternatives to behavior/coping skills
- Too abstract
- Likely does not understand all that is said
- Memory distortions
- Using the plan “in the moment”
- Lack of success interpreted as lack of compliance

Signing a “contract” promising to stop engaging in challenging behaviors
- Does not consider why a behavior is happening
- “Try harder” with no real supports
- Lack of success interpreted as lack of compliance

Points and reward systems (a.k.a. Yeah, Good Luck with That” plans)
- Often enthusiastic to do well
- Doesn’t provide support “in-the-moment”
- Long-term incentives often don’t work
- Lack of success interpreted as lack of compliance
Cognitive Supports™

1. Shifting expectations or interactions with a specific cognitive skill in mind.
Where Does Cognitive Supports™ Come From?

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS)
- “The Explosive Child” (Ross Greene)
- Behaviors are the result of “lagging skills”
- Collaboration (“Plan B”) allows us to identify the person’s concerns and solutions

Neurobehavioral Model
- “Trying Differently Rather than Harder” (Diane Malbin)
- Developmental disabilities are neurological differences in brain development (in FASD context)
- We need to adjust expectations and remember how disabilities impact the brain, and make sure our solutions work with a person’s cognitive skills set
Polyvagal Theory

- Developed by Dr. Stephen Porges
- “Beyond Behaviors” by Dr. Mona Delahooke
- Stress and trauma—in addition to many other factors—contribute to cognitive skill struggles and ongoing behaviors
Every situation, expectation, and interaction demands cognitive skills.

**Situation**

- Having friend over

**Expected Skill Ingredients**

- Attention span
- Distraction resistance
- Impulse control
- Emotional regulation
- Flexibility
- Shifting/Transitioning
- Abstract thought
- Sensory regulation
- Planning/problem-solving
- Processing and shifting to social cues

**Interaction**

- 3-minute talk with parent

**Expected Skill Ingredients**

- Emotional regulation
- Shift and transition
- Attention
- Receptive communication
- Distraction resistance
- Impulse control
- Flexibility
- Abstract thought

**Recipe**

- Needed Skill Ingredients
  - Attention span
  - Distraction resistance
  - Impulse control
  - Emotional regulation
  - Reading
  - Writing
  - Recall
The Cognitive Skills Filter Helps Us **Re-Frame**

**Traditional Terms & Interpretations**

- “She does it for my attention!”
- “He won’t keep his hands to himself.”
- “She lies because it causes drama.”
- “He’s a little asshole to me.”
- “They just don’t want to do schoolwork.”

**Cognitive Skill Possibilities**

- “She can’t hold her attention long enough to self-entertain.”
- “His body is dysregulated.”
- “She confabulates additional details, causing confusion.”
- “His brain cannot regulate his stress right now. This isn’t about me.”
- “Their executive functioning fuel is out right now.”
### WHEN WE DO

- It helps us understand what the person is going through
- That understanding allows us to think practically
- We can take a “problem-solving” angle and include the person
- We try different supports and don’t worry about failing
- We remember it’s a brain thing, not the person being a little...well, you know

### WHEN WE DON’T

- We continue to hold the person to expectations that they cannot meet
- We blame *them* for failing to meet the unreasonable expectations
- We often establish a negative interaction pattern, making collaboration difficult
- We look for solutions that don’t actually solve the in-the-moment cognitive struggles

---

**Focusing on the “Little Moments”**

UNDERSTAND/CHANGE LENS

Cognitive Skills Filter
Everyone’s brain learns, reacts, or responds in tiny timeframes—milliseconds of seconds

It only takes a moment for something to become too stressful or too demanding on the brain

Overtime, this leads to resistance and, potentially, faulty neuroception
While we are mostly talking about how to address challenging behaviors today, Cognitive Supports help a person learn many things and do better in more environments. It is about helping people live life, not a way to control children or their behaviors.
Skills & Strategies

Using Cognitive Supports Practically In Everyday Life
Essential Strategy #1

GIVE TIME TO THINK
Give time to process—the more time the better!
- This won’t be easy!
Essential Strategy #2

VISUALS
Visuals are the best support for everyone!

Visuals support many skills at once

  Processing, Executive Functioning, and Memory

We often resist visuals:

  They frequently don’t work
  They take time to make
  The person doesn’t buy-in
Starting Places—Visuals

Visuals support many different cognitive skills at once!

- Visuals can be simple!
  - “Notes”
  - Laminated piece of paper/dry erase marker

Think of what the visual is supposed to do:

- Remind
- Prompt to transition
- Remember
- Organize
- Be mindful/regulate

Use visuals to help you avoid verbal communication!

It’s OK to stop talking and switch to a visual. You will forget!
Always ask yourself:
“Are the words coming out of my mouth better off visualized?”
Executive Functioning Skills

- A “hub” of cognitive skills
- Brings in information from various parts of the brain
- Helps to connect past experiences with current situations
- Houses its own set of skills
The Battle in the Brain

• Executive Functioning evolved after the more “primitive” areas of the brain

• It allows us to *consciously* control our actions by *stopping* or *regulating* what other parts of the brain want us to do

• Our brain literally battles with itself in various situations:
  • Impulse control
  • Emotional regulation
  • Ignoring Distractions
Executive Functioning Fuel

• Executive Functioning “fuel” and skills are a limited resource*. 
  • The more complicated the skill or task, the more fuel is used
  • We want to avoid wasting fuel with:
    • Unreasonable to too difficult cognitive demands
    • Negative interactions
    • Forcing our child who can “hold it together” to do so day after day
  • Fuel is best replenished during sleep
    • You can get a small boost by eating food with glucose
    • Some people may get a boost (or feel boosted) by a nap

Executive Functioning Fuel
Lack of fuel or skills leads to:

• Frustration
• Agitation/escalation
• Overstimulation
• Anxiety

Things to keep in mind:

• Adjust expectations when struggling
• Evenings can be hard! Keep things consistent and try to connect once daily, despite struggles
• “Holding it together” costs more than learning a skill. But we have to be willing to do the skills-building process in a way that works for them.

Attention is the Foundation

- Sustained Attention
- Ignore/Redirect Distractions
- Impulse Control

Pre-Executive Processing

Millisecond by millisecond!

*Model In Development*
Sustained Attention

Pre-executive functioning attention develops as we attend to cues in the environment. Early patterns form positive or negative associations (e.g. mama!) outside of a conscious awareness.

Eventually, our brain develops an ability to choose what to focus on, and to focus for longer periods of time.

The more we can hold our attention, the more we learn by picking up on familiar patterns. We have every waking moment to practice as toddlers and children assuming we are regulated and experiencing safe neuroception.

This leads the way to planning, predicting, and abstract thought.
It is extremely common for people with **Executive Dysfunction** to be able to focus for long periods on something they are interested in. **They are not “picking and choosing”** to focus on video games but not on math. Video games *work* for their brain and are *familiar* (practiced)
The Usual Suspects

- Low Executive Functioning “fuel”
- Things moving too quickly
- Unsafe or faulty neuroception
- Too much verbal communication
- Too many skills demanded
- Neurology (disability, being a kid)
- Mental health symptoms
- Sensory dysregulation (overstimulation)
Selective attention allows us to process the environment while ignoring or filtering distractions that are irrelevant to where we want our attention to be. We still do not know exactly how selective attention works. Our brain will:

- Processes all sensory information
- Prioritizes what is needed
- Assigns meaning
- Starts cognitive tasks
Impulse Control

• Remember, the EF system evolved after the “primitive brain”
• Impulse control is not natural, even though it may seem that way
• The EF system must “battle” the primitive brain to resist each impulse
• It takes EF Fuel each time!
• Bop–It/screaming in the house
Potential Cognitive Supports for Attention, Ignoring Distractions, and Impulsivity

You likely do many of these strategies already. They become Cognitive Supports once you intentionally link on to a student’s specific cognitive skill deficit.
Potential Cognitive Supports for Attention, Ignoring Distractions, and Impulsivity

• Provide visuals of expectations/time
• Practice tasks that will be done in a noisy environment ahead of time
• Come up with a non-verbal signal that can redirect attention when needed
• Provide sensory supports (e.g. calming sensory input) throughout the routine
• Provide sensory modifications (e.g. ear plugs, calming music)
Potential Cognitive Supports for Attention, Ignoring Distractions, and Impulsivity

- Consider what is “blocking” attention
- Avoid talking! Instead, use visuals!
- Break things down into easy steps (think ahead!)
- Give lots of breaks and transition times
- Give specific time frames (e.g. “in five minutes you will be done”)
- Create an environment that is as distraction-free as possible
Potential Cognitive Supports for Attention, Ignoring Distractions, and Impulsivity

• Understand the limits attention
  • Some days just may not be good “focusing” days: that is OK!
• Adjust expectations when environment is noisy
Working Memory

- Our brain’s ability to **hold information** and **manipulate it in the moment**
- Typically developed adults have a “capacity” of about **7 pieces of data** (game of Simon)
- Critical component of **abstract thinking**
- Significant part of **processing verbal language**

**Baddeley and Hitch’s Model**

- **Visuospatial Sketchpad**
- **Phonological Loop**
- **Episodic Buffer**
“Anytime you’re giving people instructions, you’re relying on their working memory… Anytime you’re telling a child what to do, you’re relying on their working memory.”

– Dan Dubovskiy
PLANNING

- Our brains are **constantly** making plans and adjusting plans
- For most of us, this seems natural—but it’s a cognitive skill that you have practiced!
- Whenever something unexpected happens, our brains engage several cognitive skills to adjust, including planning (4. Transitioning)
Cognitive Supports for Planning and Transitioning

- Slow things down/give lots of thinking time
- Visualize! Avoid too much verbal communication ("notes")
- Give appropriate notice when the plan has to change
- Figure out what the person is expecting ahead of time, not in the moment
- When plans change, immediately “paint the picture” (compliment)
- Pre-plan and practice as much as possible!
Learn More with Nate!

www.cogsupports.com

www.youtube.com/OregonBehavior

www.facebook.com/cognitivesupport