

Cognitive Processing – The Chaining Technique

(rev. 01/07/25)

Chaining is an excellent visual technique for helping kids process incidents in which they exhibited problem-behaviors. It covers three of the four questions that comprise basic cognitive processing.

- Owning the behavior(s) that resulted in having to be separated from the peer group.
- Identifying the feelings (or thoughts) that preceded each behavior.
- Developing a plan for how to better handle a similar situation in the future.

It doesn't cover the important accountability questions of identifying how your problem-behaviors may have impacted your peers and staff. On the other hand, it does an excellent job of clarifying for kids the sequence of behaviors and reactions that escalated into an incident. It also does an excellent job of helping kids identify "choice points" in the sequence of actions and reactions where they could, realistically, taken some different action that would have had a better outcome.

Chaining is not a one-size-fits-all technique. Counselors have to use their professional judgment to determine how much detail (how many links in the chain) to include and the level of sophistication asked for from the child or youth.

Chaining also doesn't have to be done in the order listed below, but this the most typical pattern.

Step 1: Backward chaining of behaviors or actions.

The last link in the chain is the behavior(s) that resulted in having to be separated from the group.

The first link in the chain is when the client was at baseline and everything was, in general, going okay.

Work backwards to identify a series of earlier behaviors, leaving space between each behavior or action link where you can later fill in feelings and thought that took place in-between each behavior.

As with Basic Cognitive Processing, an important goal is to help kids talk about their problem-behaviors in an analytic way, which requires *not* becoming overwhelmingly upset just talking about a past incident in which you did become highly upset. This does two things. First, it requires kids to "exercise" their executive skills of reaction inhibition and stress tolerance. Second, it restores a sense of sequence and order to the parts of the client's brain that probably got overwhelmed by strong feelings during the incident and thus is confused about what actually happened.

Step 2: Forward chaining to add in the feelings / thoughts links.

Now in a collaborative way with the client, add in the feelings, thoughts, and/or triggers that preceded each behavior link.

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This helps kids to identify that behaviors happen for a reason. That reason is often times an emotional reaction that a kid had. Emotions don't have to make sense. They just are.

This is an opportunity for the counselor to add emotion vocabulary to the client's understanding, often times making distinctions between degrees of anger, degrees of frustration, etc. The idea is have the client practice analyzing their own feelings, not so much in terms of "why" they have those feelings, but rather the "how" questions like "how strong was that feeling", "how many different feelings were all mixed together", "how long did that feeling last", "how overwhelming was that feeling" (the more overwhelming a feeling that harder it was to think straight).

Step 3: Identify choice points (choice links).

Once you and your client have identified the chain of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, you help the child identify where in that chain a different choice could have been made that would have led to a better outcome.

Odds are there'll be several links, or choice-points, where your client could have asked for help, taken a break, or done some other action that would have changed the outcome.

Kids new to using chaining to analyze their own incidents will tend to pick a link near the end of the chain. Often times that's unrealistic. The counselor can point that out and suggest earlier links in the chain, when the feelings were not as overwhelming, as more realistic choice points.

Some children and youth will easily come up with better choices they could have made and others will require a lot of guidance from the counselor. This process exercises the client's executive skill of planning. It doesn't guarantee that next time the client *will* make a better choice, but the exercise of engaging in the planning will, over time and with repeated practice, improve the client's executive skills and lead to better self-regulation.