

The Labeling Intervention

(rev. 03/25/25)

Labeling is a great technique for increasing Self-Awareness and for helping kids become more thoughtful people. Labeling can be thought of as narrating what kids are doing as they're doing it. A way to think of this technique is to imagine a snapshot of what a kid is doing and the labeling intervention is the descriptive caption underneath the picture. To use a sports analogy, labeling can be like play-by-play announcing – it's a narration of what is happening, as it is happening.

- Labeling should be the most common verbal intervention used by residential staff. It is especially effective at increasing Self-Monitoring and Self-Awareness. (Engaging should be the most common social intervention, used to encourage Co-Regulation.)
- All forms of labeling can serve as a Pattern Interrupt. A pattern of being reactive, or simply operating without much conscious awareness, is interrupted by cueing a child or youth to give some thought to their immediate situation.
- *Labeling external behaviors* is intended to increase kids' self-awareness of their own actions. Self-awareness is the key executive skill for self-directed personal development, including consciously working on all the other executive skills. Labeling observable behaviors supports the development of self-monitoring, which is the first step in self-awareness. Residential staff should frequently label observable behaviors, which will feel awkward and artificial at first, but tends to be received by the kids as a form of positive attention and engagement.
- *Labeling internal behaviors* (i.e. you seem to be tense) is intended to increase kids' body awareness. Body Awareness is another part of increased Self-Awareness. People who've experienced trauma often times struggle with age-appropriate body awareness.
- *Labeling feelings* is intended to increase self-awareness of emotional reactions. People generally don't like being told how they feel. Instead, labeling feelings is generally done in question form or includes some statement that you're making a guess (i.e. "Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me like you're starting to get frustrated. Is that correct?").
- Labeling can be combined with praise or with a verbal reprimand but works best for raising self-awareness when it is used without any judgmental words (either positive or critical).
- *Labeling instead of verbal redirection or setting limits.* Simply labeling a behavior, without giving any Verbal Redirection or Limit Setting, raises kids' self-awareness and gives them a chance to practice self-regulation (which can then be praised).