Developing a Coping Culture
Application of Cognitive Behavioral Theory to Prevention/Intervention
Within a Family, a Classroom, a School

By G. Bert Allain LCSW
www.cosmoscrow.com
copingskillsfables@gmail.com

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Delinquency and drug-using behavior in adolescence is usually preceded by a number of risk factors that present themselves early on in a child's development, such as acting-out behavior and impulsivity, and problems in school such as aggressiveness with peers and academic underachievement (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992).

It is often these problematic behaviors that precipitate referrals to social workers or other mental health specialists in school and community-based settings. Research has shown that prevention interventions with young, school-age children should mobilize protective factors such as impulse control, parental support, and social and academic competence, and reduce the risk factors described above before problem behaviors develop (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999).

This booklet describes one such intervention, the promotion of the concept of developing a "Coping Culture" within the home, classroom, and the school. This innovative school-based prevention curriculum encourages, in-class problem solving, social skill-building exercises, modeling, and reinforcement to identify, challenge, and modify young children's negative or faulty cognitions.

Rooted in cognitive-behavioral theory, the concepts in this booklet are designed to help you develop a "Coping Culture" to teach children about their thinking, the connections between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and about how to change what they are thinking, feeling, and doing when their behavior causes them problems.

This booklet likely will be of great interest to teachers who work with children and families, and to social workers who practice in school, mental health, and substance abuse settings. Practitioners in the field of school social work, will find the material in this chapter timely. The multi-system focus of this booklet is consistent with the social work ecological approach, which, according to noted experts in the field (viz., Allen-Meares; 2004; Germain, 2002) is the most desirable theoretical framework to guide social work practice in school settings.

**Working within a school (classroom) setting to
encourage a Coping Culture**

It is often difficult to get an institution (family/classroom/school) to try something different. In this case, to focus on developing a positive Coping Culture, rather than punishing the very behaviors this "culture" would change. This booklet will give you a brief explanation of how to promote the ideas necessary to build a coping culture within a family setting, a classroom, and an entire school.

Your first role is that of educator, helping parents and teachers understand the role that a child's thinking plays in their ability to cope adequately with life difficulties. It may not always be easy to get even well-educated and well-meaning adults to make the shift from focusing exclusively on behaviors (or attitudes) to a person's **thinking** as the core issue needing to be addressed.

The first thing you must do is present **Step One** in the development of a Coping Culture.

- **1. Focus on Cognitions** (The thinking, belief system of the children).

- **Modifying behaviors may or may not change the "beliefs"; consequently, these changes may not generalize to other settings or other people.**

- **"Attitude" and "Personality" are our observations of behavior and assumptions about emotions, filtered by our own belief system**

Most of us focus on behaviors and assume that if someone changes their behavior, they will maintain this change forever. And this may happen, if the underling beliefs that prompt that behavior have also changed. But often, change is contingent on the negative consequences (punishment) and once that is removed, old patterns reemerge, if their underling irrational beliefs remain the same.

It is easy for most of us to attribute this relapse into unacceptable behaviors as the result of some "Negative Attitude" or "Personality Defect" that are not amenable to change. Thus, as an agent of developing a Coping Culture, you must educate other adults in the **10 most common irrational beliefs of children** and problems they can cause.

The purpose of this process is to remove the "mystery" of "**Why we do what we do**", so that the cause and effect … irrational thinking leads to inappropriate or overly intense emotions and dysfunctional behaviors…can be more easily understood.

10 Common Irrational beliefs of children (V. Waters, 1982)
Some of the emotions, behaviors, and attitudes that they may cause

1. I'm bad if I make a mistake.
Gets upset with any imperfection...hesitant to start/quick to quit
Find normal school and home expectations threatening

2. Things should come easily to me.
Easily frustrated and frequently angry
Unable to be patient or persistent

3. It's awful if others don't like me.
Anxious about any perceived criticism
Easily manipulated and unable to see others realistically

4. There is only one right answer.
Anxious in school situations may tend to isolate
Unable to see alternative solutions to problems...stubborn

5. I shouldn't show my feelings.
Unwilling to put self in "threatening situations" (reading aloud, apologizing)
Excessively shy and timid

6. I shouldn't have to wait for anything.
Impatient and Demanding...angry
Sees normal frustration as a confirmation of "That's not fair"

7. Everything should go my way and I should always get what I want.
Manipulative of others regardless of negative consequences
Whinny and passive aggressive with those "In Power"

8. The world should be fair and bad people should be punished.
Sees normal life frustrations as a serious personal problem
Hold grudges...vindictive...unable to see alternatives

9. I must win.
Unable to just "do your best" ...unrealistic in expectations
Views normal difficulties as unacceptable...prone to quit or bully

10. Adults should be perfect.
Unrealistic in expectations of self and others
Gravitate to those who will "Tell me what I want to hear"

You can use an educational opportunity to illustrate the consequences of this type of thinking in children by talking about real life (home or classroom) behaviors that result from these irrational beliefs. By doing so, other adults will see the connection between the irrational thinking that leads to inappropriate or overly intense emotions and to dysfunctional behaviors in the home and school setting.

The next step is to have parents and teachers accept (but not approve) that much the disruptive and self-limiting behaviors of children is "normal" even though it needs to change. The rationale for this is that it removes the "badness" label from the children that may limit adult's willingness to do the "hard work" necessary to help children learn to cope more effectively.

- **2. Accept the normality of their "dysfunction"**

- **Their emotions and behaviors are the result of the typical irrational thinking of children.**

- **Their environment may reinforce their irrational thinking.**

If children are responding to typically occurring irrational beliefs that need to be modified or changed, then they are not purposefully trying to aggravate you, they are just being normal, though irrational children. This can be true for the seven-year-old but also the seventeen-year-old who is still insisting that their childhood irrational beliefs are true and that life should cooperate with them.

Many children are in environments that tend to encourage, reinforce, or tolerate their irrational beliefs. Too often, peers, and even parents still maintain their own irrational childhood beliefs, so it becomes even more complicated for these children to change. They can see themselves as being "unfaithful" to these significant people if they try and change their behaviors. Lack of environmental support can make change for any of us difficult but for children it can make the process not only difficult but scary.

The third consideration when developing a coping culture has to do with timing. "Timing is not the main thing; it is the only thing" is as relevant here as it is to selling stocks and real estate. Too often no attempt is made at teaching more effective "coping skills" until the emotional or behavioral problems are significant and of long duration.

The goal of building a Coping Culture is to have in place a system that prevents the problems that get children referred to the school social worker or school disciplinary program in the first place

- **3. Address their need to develop effective cognitive coping skills as young as possible.**

- **Older children may have a "vested interest" in their irrational beliefs. Their belief system has become integrated into their self-image.**

- **Older children are not as amenable to positive reinforcement and are more likely to use a "mental filter" to discount rational information.**

There is no need for us to wait until problems occur if we understand that the genesis of problem behavior occurs because children have not learned more effective cognitive coping skills. If we are able to teach them, in a therapeutic setting after they have been punished or suspended, why not do it before they experience any of these difficulties.

By waiting until the problem is so significant that "professional help" or disciplinary response is necessary, the child may be "unwilling" or unable to easily change. Think of weight loss…which is easier; to lose 20 pounds when you are 20 pounds overweight or 100 pounds when you are 100 pounds overweight? Your body is more demanding for calories when you are 100 pounds overweight. Your ability and willingness to exercise is less when you are 100 pounds overweight. And finally, it will cost too much to replace your "extra 100 pounds wardrobe".

In addition, as children move into later childhood and adolescence, they naturally are less willing to listen to adults. There is just something in most of us that causes us to "tune out" the suggestions and guidance of our elders even when we know that they are correct. We will do things we know are not in our best self-interest despite the suggestions, warning and guidance offered by those we once trusted but who have now passed some "magical age barrier".

Teaching our children as early as possible with age appropriate material how to cope effectively with life difficulties is the next step in this process of developing a Coping Culture.

- **4. Use age appropriate material.**
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  - **Lecture type presentations are often not effective (with any age).**

    - **Use multi-sensory material if possible, with attention getting colors or characters.**

    - **Use "cues" to stimulate recognition of poor and good coping skills.**

Unfortunately, there is little in the way of material that is designed to accomplish this task. The program used by this booklet's author is entitled Adventure of Cosmos Crow (available through Coping Skills LLC at [www.Cosmos Crow.com](http://www.CosmosCrow.com)) or contact us at copingskillsfables@gmail.com. It is a program developed from the "ground up" because it was designed to target the typical irrational beliefs of children.

Also, most programs are not designed as a prevention modality for younger children. And finally, much of what is available is often, lecture and activity driven which may not be interesting for younger children and is often not something that can be presented over and over again to the same population to stimulate effective coping skills.

It may be necessary for you to develop some of your own material or modify available material in the formation of a Coping Culture. If you feel competent to develop your own ideas, be sure to include "cue strategies". These are images, memorable statements and so on that will help the child recall the effective cognitions you have built into your program.

You may have to search until you find some program that meets your expectations. But whatever it takes, if you choose to pursue developing a Coping Culture with families or in a school setting, follow through not only with the tasks but with the positive reinforcement. This next step is extremely critical in our process of creating a Coping Culture.

- **5. Reinforce appropriate coping skills.**

- **Verbal praise, "token economies" and other techniques can be used, in a planned manner, to increase the likelihood that effective coping will continue.**

- **Punishment is not effective in cultivating new skills and can have the impact of "devaluing" the authority figure.**

Often, the most difficult part of developing a Coping Culture is to get the adults (teachers or parents) involved, to use effective reinforcement techniques to encourage and maintain the skills being taught. Too often you will hear, "Well they should know what to do, so why do I have to praise them for just doing what they know they need to do."

You have probably experienced something like the quote in the previous paragraph. The child does the right thing (where previously they would have done the wrong thing) and after a few "rights". their positive behavior and the "Good Thinking" that caused it is ignored. The expectation is that now that they know the right behavior they should never go back to their ineffective thinking and behavior.

And when they revert to their habitual thinking and negative behavior…we cannot understand what happened, "They were doing so good and now I guess they want to be punished". It is frustrating when they backslide. But we should anticipate that they will and that means we need to pay more attention to the "change process". Use positive reinforcement to shape behaviors and gradually encourage the child to self-reinforce. Punishment does not teach skills and should be used sparingly.

We purposefully use the term Coping Culture to indicate that it is not for a few children (with special problems) but for everyone in the family, class or school. Not only does almost everyone need help with their own irrational thinking but by including everyone, you will find they are able to encourage and help each other.

- **6. Promote a "Classroom Coping Culture "**

- **Include all students in the classroom, not just those with obvious behavioral problems.**

- **Encourage students to make each other aware of ineffective and effective coping.**

- **Encourage effective coping throughout the school year. Conduct your program for multiple years to insure habituation.**

One interesting observation made by teachers in a school setting using the concepts of developing a coping culture is, "Good kids really like it". The classroom teachers found that those children who, "Don't really need the program but see they are okay", recognizing that they (for what ever reason… effective parenting, intelligence, or disposition) were already coping adequately in a lot of ways. And as is normal, in a typical classroom setting, they (the effectively coping children) were considered "odd" by their peers. Because more effective (mature) coping skills were being taught, they recognized that they were "okay" and an unexpected outcome was that their self-image improved.

Children can be cruel, but they can also be helpful. They can be encouraged to appropriately tell others when they are having "Stinky Thinking" and behaving in a "Thumbs Down" manner. In a "Coping Culture", this understanding of "why we do what we do", allows peers to modify behaviors of each other in a mature manner.

By conducting your program for multiple years, the good coping skills have the time to become habituated and used in real world situations. There is an enormous value to the message being repeated year after year by different adults and peers and having positive experiences because of your "good coping skills".

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This next part of the plan to develop a Coping Culture is frequently the most difficult. Many of you reading this booklet will have had experience in trying to get families involved in a process that could be greatly beneficial for their child and the family as a whole. And often it may seem as though you are the only one who sees the value and necessity of the effort.

- **7. Involve family**

- **Make parents aware of your program and invite them to an "Introduction to the Coping Culture" meeting.**

- **Encourage parents to reinforce effective coping at home.**

We don't know what resources you may have but use whatever is available to encourage family involvement. If you are working with a family specifically, you probably have a mandate of some type requiring them to participate. But understand that you may be doing as much work, teaching the parents, as you are the children, to get them give up their "Stinky Thinking".

In a school setting you may have to accept that in some cases parental involvement will be minimal. That is too bad but should not stop you. You can develop a coping culture in a classroom and even a school, independent of parental support. And although such support would be great, you should not pass on an opportunity because such support is missing.

Many classroom teachers have said of this concept, something like, "I know I am only planting the seed but if that is all I can do then that is what I will do". We have all known people who at some point in their life make a dramatic change for the better. Often when asked about it, they will reference someone in their past who said something or did something that helped bring about this positive change. In almost all cases the person responsible will never know that the "seed" sprouted.

The Coping Culture project for a family, classroom or school should be monitored and evaluated. But remember, this is a complicated, long term project without quick outcomes. As such, it will not fit many of the traditional models. You may need to be creative in your evaluation to ensure that what you want to occur, is in fact occurring.

- **8. Evaluate the effort**

- **Be realistic in your expectations**

- **Take "small steps" toward establishing a coping culture**

- **Expect "setbacks" and what to do when they happen**

- **Reward progress and use measures that truly indicate effective coping change**

The Coping Culture project has developed a standard measurement instrument appropriate for those using the materials from Coping Skills LLC. We have also used nationally available instruments such as "Social Skills Questionnaire" in the development of the therapeutic fables used in Adventures of Cosmos Crow.

What we have learned in the years of working with this concept is to be realistic. You may have school officials who will welcome the idea of developing a Coping Culture and the behavior changes that can occur but become discouraged if they don't see significant progress within the first nine weeks of implementation.

You will have adults (teachers and parents) who are reluctant to see the value of your efforts. They may see this project as an imposition and the concept as some "pie in the sky" plan that will never work.

As you can imagine, those attitudes will make it much harder for your plans to work. So, you must be realistic in your expectations just as parents, classroom teachers and school officials should be realistic. Change can and will occur, but it will not be dramatic or perfect and there will be difficulties and setbacks. But isn't that the essence of the concept of coping,

Coping … "The ability to experience a less than optimal situation, face it, accept it, proceed forward with an adaptive response", (Kendall, 1992)

Finally, to develop a Coping Culture you must have the fortitude to stick with it, not only when it is new and interesting but year after year.

- **9. Continue, continue continue**

- **Recognize that some may think that such an effort is unnecessary (they should get this at home, know it already), or too time consuming (without considering the positive impact on the learning environment).**

- **Children may be reluctant and even resistant to such a program initially. But once a program as been established it will be accepted as part of the normal day just as recess and lunch.**

When you choose to be a leader and attempt to institute change, no matter how good your motives, you will run into "roadblocks". One of the stories used in the Coping Skills series is that of the "Too Birds". The skill being taught in the story is to watch out for "Too Beliefs" as in "This too difficult", "Take too long" and so on because Too Beliefs are limiting.

Most children and many adults have a lot of limiting "Too" beliefs. And they cannot understand why you can't see the wisdom in those "Too" beliefs like they can…"you must be foolish".

It may take a lot of effort on your part to deal with the "Too" beliefs of others and when those times occur take a minute to remember why you are working so hard to develop a Coping Culture. **Take a moment to read the "Parents Poem".**

PARENT'S POEM

**Some day when my children are old enough to understand the
logic that motivates a parent I will tell them:**

**I loved you enough to ask you where you were going, with whom,
and what time you would be home.**

**I loved you enough to be silent and let you discover that
your new best friend was a creep.**

**I loved you enough to stand over you for two hours while you cleaned your
room. A job that would have taken me 15 minutes.**

**I loved you enough to let you assume the responsibility for your actions even
when the penalties were so harsh they almost broke my heart.**

**But most of all, I loved you enough to say "no" when I knew you
would hate me for it.**

**Those were the most difficult battles of them all. I'm glad I won
them because in the end you won something too.**

Anonymous

www.cosmoscrow.com

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