

NEWSLETTER

TF CBT

Written By : Natalie Gallo

Behavior Management in Therapy Sessions: Working with Trauma Impacted Youth

Trauma informed care is the crux of our role as TF-CBT therapists. Among the number of other tasks and must-do's in our role with clients, it's no secret that behavior management is a critical piece of this balancing act. Many therapists experience internal conflict around behavior management and setting limits, citing that there is concern it will impact rapport and/or lead to harm caused to the youth in a space in which they are engaging in incredibly challenging internal work (i.e. trauma therapy).

This newsletter's focus will look at the role behavior management plays in therapeutic contact with youth *beyond* just ensuring they follow the rules.



The Secondary and Tertiary Role of Behavior Management

Core features of traumatic experiences include: losing a sense of control; lack of knowing what to expect from our environment or the people in caregiving roles, and unpredictability. Additionally, most young people need consistency in their environments to help them learn, grow and develop. Trauma informed behavior management strategies call for clear rules, rewards, and consequences, and subsequently *follow through* -even with consequences- if warranted. As therapists, we actually build trust and rapport by keeping our word and maintaining the predictability in the environment we create. Setting rules and then only sometimes enforcing them, breeds feelings of uncertainty in our clients - they no longer feel settled in what the expectations are or what our response will be to their behaviors. Unintentionally, this could increase anxiety and trauma-related feeling reminders.

Fundamental Behavior Management Strategies

A few basic tenets of behavior management are always recommended.

1. **Establish 2-3 core rules for your therapy space.** Make them important and easily observable. This is the difference between "Be Nice" and "Use gentle hands with touching the toys, objects in the room, and others."
2. **Utilize positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors.** When your client engages in positive behaviors throughout sessions, use stickers, point systems, high fives, labeled praises, whatever your client responds to!

3. **Selective attention to minor misbehaviors.** Given you only have 2-3 main rules (with potentials for consequences if broken) means minor misbehavior will be shaped through your attention. This doesn't mean ignoring a child completely, but rather avoiding correcting/addressing minor misbehavior in lieu of using the positive reinforcement noted above to shape the behavior to be more desirable is key.
4. **If a identified rule with an established consequence is broken, the consequence must be given.**



More resources at
<https://oklahomatfcbt.org/>

I don't want my client to be upset. They have already been through so much.

Understanding and empathizing with the traumatic experiences our clients have gone through is a critical part of our jobs. No therapist wants to induce increased harm to their clients and even more so when a client may already have been hurt or mistreated by an adult in their life who was supposed to be a safe person.

What messages do you tell yourself when you bring in gradual exposure and/or move into Trauma Narrative? Those same types of reminders will support your follow through related to behavior management in therapy sessions when setting limits or even, if necessary, giving a consequence.

Consider: What is your narrative before, during, and after sessions with behaviorally challenging clients? Look to the right for one potential option of a helpful narrative.



I'm showing my client I am a person of my word, they can trust what I say, and that I care about their safety.



Training Opportunity Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT) is an evidence-based behavior parent training treatment for young children with emotional and behavioral disorders that places emphasis on improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing parent-child interaction patterns. Children and their caregivers are seen together in PCIT.

For More About PCIT Training Opportunities [Click Here](#)



Telehealth Considerations

Telehealth comes with its own host of complications as it relates to managing behavior. The primary caregiver is going to be the most important asset in establishing the environment before the client even gets onto a zoom call. Below are a list of considerations.

1. **Reduce distractions in the space and lock down the device.**
2. **Create clear rules for telehealth expectations.** Where can and can't the child go? Can they leave the screen for any period of time? What are they allowed to bring to session?
3. **Create system for caregiver monitoring.** Whether it's intermittent check ins or a system for the you to contact them mid-session, caregivers eyes/ears will be critical.
4. **Consider adjusting therapy to allow caregiver to be in the majority of every session** with the client to support behavioral concerns.
5. **Behavioral reinforcement will look a bit different.** Work with the caregiver on types of rewards may be appropriate in their home for a client to earn after session! Virtual stickers are also just as reinforcing when a client loves the subject matter.