

Guide 10

The CAR model—using Thought-Feeling Connections with children



As we discussed in Guide 3, sometimes it's hard to identify our *automatic thoughts*. We often have more experience labelling our *feelings*. The Thought-Feeling Connections can be used in reverse to help us identify *our* thoughts and the beliefs that cause *children's* feelings and behaviour.

Andrea, a teacher who works with toddlers, explains how using the Thought-Feeling Connections in reverse helped her deal with a toddler's outburst as the group prepared to go outside to play:

The Thought-Feeling Connections helped me have empathy and patience for Alex. I realized that he really wanted to stay in the room, but it was difficult for him to articulate that because he is only two years old. So, I used the CAR model. By getting a hold on his emotion—the R part of CAR—I could get a hold on the A part—his thinking—and let him know that I understood why he was reacting with an outburst. For example, I could see that he was feeling pretty angry (R), so I “guessed” that he believed his rights were being violated (A). He'd been so content playing with the blocks that, when he was told that he had to stop (C)—the circumstance—he considered this a violation of his rights to choose his activity. With this in mind, I said to him, “I can see you're angry, Alex. You really would like to stay inside and play with the blocks. Right now, we're all going outside to play, but when we come back in, you can play with the blocks again.” I guess he felt really understood, because he did calm down and let me help him get dressed to go outside.

Here's another case example showing how Laura, a teacher working with four- to six-year-olds, uses Thought-Feeling Connections to help children express their beliefs:

Thought-Feeling connections help me understand what a child is thinking about a situation, so they're good for everyday problem solving with kindergarten children. For example, I was working with two children (M and N). M said, “N always plays with G.” Instead of just asking, “How does that make you feel?” I asked her, “What do you say to yourself when that happens?” When she replied, “She likes G better than me,” I was able to get at the belief that led to her hurt feelings. Then I helped her generate alternatives and

dispute her explanation about why her friend was playing with someone else. I learned this approach could be used in everyday problem solving.

In the box below, you'll find guidelines to help you analyze the Thought-Feeling Connections you see in a particular child and to create interventions to help.

THOUGHT-FEELING CONNECTIONS: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

- 1) Note the 4 Ws of the child's response to daily stress:
 - When** does it happen?
 - Where** does it happen?
 - Who** does it happen with?
 - What** does the child do? (the behaviour)
- 2) Consider *why* the child might be responding this way. What Thought-Feeling Connections might be operating? For example, if the child generally responds to situations with anger, is it possible that the child is stuck in a "violation of rights" belief?
- 3) Use your assessment of the Thought-Feeling Connections to develop a plan to help the child cope more effectively with daily stressors.
 - a) State your goal for the plan, for example, “*I want to help Sammy join a group without becoming angry and aggressive.*”
 - b) Describe how you will help the child develop a more resilient response to this circumstance. Use “Where?” “When?” and “What?” as guidelines for your plan.

Thought-Feeling Connections—make a guess, then observe again

When we use thought-feeling connections with children, it's very important to check our “guesses” about children's beliefs by continuing to observe their interactions and reactions. The following case study illustrates how one teacher used thought-feeling connections to focus her observations and further understand a child's behaviour.



CASE EXAMPLE: USING THOUGHT-FEELING CONNECTIONS AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

Told by Olia Ciurpita (ECE, Casa Loma Child Care Centre, Toronto)

Anthony, a five-year-old in my school-age room, is very bright, but has a difficult time socially and emotionally. He often has a hard time beginning his day on a positive note, becoming quite aggressive and seeming angry with both me and his peers after his mom leaves.

I used the Thought-Feeling Connections to observe his behaviour. Initially, I just saw his anger, so I watched for evidence that he believed his rights were being violated.

As I observed morning drop-offs more closely, though, I realized that his mom, who was understandably concerned about getting to work, frequently attempted to leave very quickly. As she tried to get out the door, I noticed a worried look on Anthony's face and could almost feel his anxiety mounting. I wondered if Anthony was experiencing a "future threat belief"—perhaps that his mom was hurrying to get away from him, causing him to worry about his importance to her.

After his Mom left, Anthony would try to join the other children, but he'd end up knocking over their structures, become verbally aggressive, and blame them. Using the Thought-Feeling Connections again helped me see his intentions in a new way. When Anthony behaved aggressively while trying to join the group, instead of viewing him as angry, destructive, or inconsiderate, I began to attribute a more positive intent. I saw that he was attempting to soothe the anxious feelings caused by his mother's quick departure by trying to connect or belong, but didn't yet have the skills to do so. So I focused first on trying to help him calm his anxiety, then I worked with him to develop his joining skills.

In addition, I found that my new hypothesis about the intention behind Anthony's aggressive behavior

helped me talk with Anthony about it. When Anthony would tell me that he hit a peer "because I am angry," I would try to find out more details, hoping to get an accurate view of the situation: "Ohhh ... can you tell me what you are angry about? What made you angry?" When we investigated the situation this way, we'd often find out that he wasn't really angry at the other person or situation. Instead, he expressed a future threat belief—he was worried that he wouldn't be included in the activities with his peers. This confirmed my hypothesis that Anthony's aggression was related to anxiety not anger.

I find if I put myself in close proximity to Anthony when he predictably has more trouble, like at the beginning of the day and in less structured times such as free play, it helps relieve his anxious feelings. If I see him beginning to lose control, I immediately go over, we take some deep breaths together, and this helps him regulate his emotions and calm down. If I can get to him before his anxiety takes over and he "loses it," we can often talk our way through the incident and problem solve together about other ways to handle the situation.

I find that I am no longer just stopping the aggressive behaviour; I am trying to increase his awareness of his behaviour and the impact it has on other people. I have noticed that, more and more, I'm taking the time to help him identify his feelings and find out what meaning he gives to the situation.

This step-by-step process of analyzing the cause of the problem is helping him respond more appropriately in groups. He still needs support to regulate his emotions and control his impulses, but he is beginning to self-regulate with just a visual cue from me.

What do teachers say about using Thought-Feeling Connections with children?

Thought-Feeling Connections can help teachers identify the usually unseen thoughts in a child. Once the child's thinking is identified, it's easier to understand the child's behaviour.
—AZ (kindergarten/preschool)

After analyzing children's behaviour using Thought-Feeling Connections, it is much easier to plan strategies that help deal with the behaviour and understand the causes. —SD (preschool)

Summary of Guide 10

The CAR model—using Thought-Feeling Connections with children



- Adults can use the “Thought-Feeling Connections” in reverse to help understand the beliefs that drive children’s feelings and behaviours.
- By observing children’s behaviour and identifying their feelings (the Rs), we can “guess” what their automatic thoughts (A) about a situation might be.
- Teachers report that increased understanding of the reason behind children’s challenging behaviour helps them respond with empathy and patience and, thereby, maintain a positive relationship with the child.
- Using Thought-Feeling Connections helps adults
 - analyze the cause of a problem
 - design appropriate interventions
 - engage in a step-by-step approach to help children develop approaches that build their resilience