

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Working with Young People : **Black & White Thinking**

Parents and workers often expect young people to be able to think about things in the same way they do. They may not be aware that the thinking processes of young people are different. Adults may know this on a conceptual level but find it hard to take this into account when communicating with a young person.

Young people's cognitive development is not yet complete

Many young people are not yet developed enough to think in complex ways about a range of issues. Immature cognition often leads to simple solutions to problems, and a lack of ability to see things from other people's perspectives. This type of thought is present-focused and tied to reality.¹

Mature adult thinking includes the ability to think in the abstract and to consider a number of solutions to a problem. Attainment of such thinking is not universal, even in adulthood.²

Lack of positive experiences affects cognitive development

Cognitive development occurs through experiences such as positive education, caregiver responsiveness and opportunities to try new things. Many of the young that we encounter in our practice have difficulty with advanced thinking skills. Children who have been neglected or abused, for example, may have had less exposure to experiences that foster mature thinking.³

Young people may still predominantly use less mature thinking processes, particularly during periods of stress or anxiety. Additionally, the region of the brain that permits long-term planning, impulse control and consideration of consequences or alternatives is the last to grow, usually not until the early 20s.⁴

Black and White Thinking

"Black and white thinking" is a common manifestation of immature thought; thinking that is rigid, stubborn and often extreme, with few 'grey areas'. Examples of black and white thinking are:

- The teachers all treat me like crap
- Everybody hates me
- Sophie will always be my best friend
- My mum is wrong all the time.
- My dad won't let me do anything

- My family is weird
- I hate my mum/dad/sister/brother

Workers and parents need to be aware that comments or thoughts like these are not necessarily reliable indicators of the magnitude of problems. Workers may not be able to rely on such statements to form a picture of family relationships. It is better to gather a range of opinions from family members or others. This will provide a better picture of the quality of family relationships. More informed assumptions about the level of family connectedness can be made and important connections will not be missed.

It is also a good idea to check back regularly with young people, to see if their feelings about things or people have changed.

Effects on family

Immature thought processes can often lead to family conflict. Parents can be particularly sensitive to the comments that arise from a lack of cognitive maturity, such as impulsive speech. They may take them more seriously than intended. They may think that the young person is being selfish or self-absorbed.

Your knowledge and understanding of cognitive development can be used to explain to parents that such thinking is a normal part of adolescent growth.

Strategies

Work with young people and family members to gently shift their thinking about issues. This may help to reduce conflict. Asking questions such as the following may help to more clearly establish the quality of family relationships:

- "Do you always feel this way about your mother/father/sister/brother?"
- "Were there times when things were better between you?"
- "What sorts of things were happening when things were better?"

Take care to work in a developmentally appropriate manner. Be open and direct in your approach.

1. Muuss, R.E. (1996) Theories of Adolescence. New York: McGraw-Hill. Sixth Edition. Chapter 8.

2. Kuhn, D., Langer, J., Kohlberg, L., & Haan, N. S. (1977). The development of formal operations. in logical and moral judgment. Genetic Psychology Monographs, 95, 97-188

3. Daniel, B., Wassell, S. & Gilligan, R. (1999) Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

4. ABC Radio National, 13 November 2004. All in the Mind: Rebels and the Cause – The Adolescent Brain. Internet: www.abc.net.au/rn/science/mind/stories/s1240968.htm

Understanding

When assessing clients, consider to what extent they demonstrate advanced thinking skills. Do they exhibit empathy, abstract thought, problem solving, articulation of values and beliefs? If not, they may have more trouble with the 'grey areas' of life.

Let the young person and family know that black and white thinking is characteristic of normal adolescent development.

Change

Encourage the young person to explore their own thinking and whether it is serving them well in their relationships with their family and friends.

Use the example of an issue from the young person's own experience. Look at it together from a number of angles:

- Suggest they put themselves in their parent's shoes for a moment
- Ask them to imagine other possible ways of dealing with the issue.
- Ask them to recall an issue or situation when they were less concrete in their approach.
- What was that like?
- What was the outcome?
- Could this be applied to other situations?

Once a relationship of trust has been established, make suggestions about ways to improve communication with their family. Some gentle examples of compromise may help.

Acceptance

Accept that some young people are simply not developmentally ready to think in other ways. Help parents to compromise or accept what they can.



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- Many young people are not cognitively developed enough to think in complex ways yet.
- Cognitive development occurs through experiences such as education, caregiver responsiveness and opportunities to try new things.
- Black and White" thinking, or stubborn, rigid and extreme thinking, is common with immature cognitive development
- Parents may be particularly sensitive to comments that arise from a lack of cognitive maturity, and they can be helped to understand that this is part of growing up
- Consider to what extent clients exhibit advanced or immature thinking skills
- Encourage young people to think about their thinking, and whether it is serving them well in relationships
- Accept that young people are just not ready to think in more mature ways



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Reframing Feelings about Family
- Family Development and Transition Points
- Family Dynamics

Parent Help Sheets

- Adolescent Development
- Building our Relationship



Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au