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# COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

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**Civic Research Institute**

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# Introduction

Practitioners in juvenile justice and other youth-serving systems have had only a few therapeutic tools and program interventions to use with youth placed in their care. Certainly behavior modification techniques have been the most popular among clinicians and others to both manage and shape youth behavior. Until the 1970s, when advances in computer technology and the ability for academicians and criminologists to conduct program analyses and develop theoretically sound, evidenced-based practices were enhanced, practitioners had little science available to them to change youth behaviors, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Since that time, professionals in the corrections field, especially those who interface with aggressive and violent at-risk youth, have labored intensely to develop programs that work, that are outcome- and evidence-based, and that provide youth with the skill sets and cognitive techniques to deal with stressful, anger-producing, problem situations.

The debate about “what works,” since Martinson’s (1974) proclamation that nothing we do in corrections has a meaningful impact on criminal behavior and recidivism, has created a defensive posture as juvenile justice practitioners attempt to provide safe and secure environments in which youth need to grow and develop. Despite these conditions, many fine programs and therapeutic cognitive interventions have been developed in reaction to the public policy debate that Martinson initiated.

Yet popular public opinion does not support treatment rehabilitation care for youth adjudicated to the juvenile justice systems. On the contrary, most communities want their delinquent, at-risk youth removed from their midst and punished hard for their antisocial, criminal behaviors. One need only review the statutes that were passed during the early 1990s, which included trying and sentencing youth as adults for crimes they committed, often placing these youth in adult prisons, to realize how negative public opinion was toward juveniles who engaged in delinquent or criminal activities. Harsh sentences, long prison terms, and a “first strike and you’re out” mentality created overcrowded conditions in juvenile institutions and strained the youth practitioners who wanted to create therapeutic, treatment-oriented, habilitative programs and services for youth placed in their care.

It was not until the beginning of the 1980s that youth advocates, especially those who worked in juvenile justice systems, initiated projects to design and develop cognitive behavioral interventions that had an impact on the youths’ skill deficits and cognitive thinking errors. Some of these earlier interventions were first developed in adult prison settings, but many of these interventions were products of innovative social scientists who worked with at-risk youth in community settings, detention centers, and juvenile institutions. The more effective interventions were designed through partnerships between university centers and juvenile justice systems at the state and municipal jurisdictional levels. Many of the more competent programs and services were successful because of visionary leaders who were executives in state departments of Juvenile Justice or Youth Authorities. The liaison between the practitioner in the field and the academician in the university center provided rich networks of creative, innovative, and novel approaches to treat youth at risk. Much of this history is documented throughout this volume by individuals who developed some of the more innovative practices used today.



This book is an exploration of the cognitive behavioral interventions that have been successfully designed, developed, implemented, evaluated, and replicated since such methods were first introduced more than five decades ago. Part 1 provides the background, history, and development of the cognitive behavioral school. The chapters in this section provide the foundation for the reader to understand that the cognitive behavioral interventions were developed along two parallel tracks: those based on cognitive restructuring and those based on cognitive skills. These chapters also provide the reader with an appreciation of the science and technology that had to be developed in order for these programs to be designed and ultimately implemented in the field so that practitioners could successfully use them.

Having an understanding of the philosophical foundations, theory, and historical perspectives will arm the practitioner with the resources to investigate the development and implementation issues that are faced when developing, designing, implementing, training, or administering cognitive behavioral programs. Part 2 of this volume addresses this information. Chapter 5 identifies management and implementation challenges and provides suggested resources and solutions; Chapter 6 details a specific model that has been successful within a large national youth services system.

The chapters in Part 3 describe specific cognitive behavioral interventions. Great care was taken to select programs that represent both cognitive restructuring and cognitive skills within the cognitive behavioral intervention school. Where possible, the original author or program developer was invited to write the chapter for his or her particular area, so that the reader benefits from the seminal expertise as well as the passion of the innovator. While reviewing this section, practitioners will quickly appreciate that these programs, although appropriate to a broad range of at-risk youth, also have specific application to target populations. Chapter 8, for example, describes a program specifically directed toward African-American youth; however, its concepts of cultural exploration, use of adult volunteers as models and mentors, and the infusion of ethnic celebrations are generic techniques useful across most cultures. Chapters 10 and 13, while descriptions of cognitive behavioral interventions, also deserve special attention because both represent systemwide implementation of interventions. Chapter 10 describes how cognitive behavioral models are designed and developed for distribution throughout the United States by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, a premier, mostly community-based, grassroots youth services organization. Chapter 13 is a description of a cognitive behavioral model that incorporates a specific cognitive behavioral intervention that has been developed in Sweden and replicated in Norway and Poland. The reader will quickly realize that the globalization of the human services has provided yet another venue that supports this author's contention that children and youth at risk are the same the world over. Chapters 7, 9, 11, and 12 are reflective of the myriad programs that have been developed to change anti-social behaviors of at-risk youth. These programs have been selected because each has been a model in its area, serving as a prototype for others to build and expand cognitive behavioral theory, methods, and techniques.

Part 4 provides the practitioner with three chapters that define in simple but profound ways the importance of competent program evaluation and research. These chapters in very clear and concrete terms give information about program evaluation models (Chapter 15), types of research that have been conducted throughout the life of the cognitive behavioral intervention movement (Chapter 14), the results from the

major research efforts, and specific case examples of research model applications (Chapter 16).

This author is indebted to his colleagues for their support and contributions. Several nationally renowned authors have contributed their time and effort to make this book possible. My gratitude to Dr. Jack Bush for his chapter on cognitive restructuring; to Dr. Juliana Taymans for her chapter on problem solving (both these individuals are my coauthors for *Thinking for a Change*); to Dr. Carter Julian Savage for his contributions from the Boys and Girls Clubs of America; to my dear friends and colleagues from New York State—G. Rosaline Preudhomme and Leonard G. Dunston—for their contribution to people of color; and to Mikael Kalt of Malmö, Sweden, who brilliantly wrote a chapter in one of his “second languages.” Last but not least I am grateful to Dr. Patricia Van Voorhis, Dr. Jennifer Pealer, and Dr. Edward Latessa of the University of Cincinnati who contributed the chapters for Part 4, the research and evaluations material. All of these are truly the movers and shakers of our field who have labored long to advance the practice of quality services to at-risk youth.

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— *Barry Glick*  
March 15, 2006

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