Are You a Careful Thinker?

"The most significant moment in cognitive development occurs when the child uses language not only for communication with others, but as a tool for regulating his or her own perceptions and actions."
- Lev Vygotsky

Rationale:
In the April edition of our newsletter, we introduced the idea of using a chart (pictured at right) to help young children identify their emotional reactions to events and then translate that understanding into words. We also noted that this also allows children to communicate this information to others, who can in turn help them learn that they can take action to regulate the intensity of their emotions.

Are You a Careful Thinker is an intervention designed to help young children understand one type of action that they can take to regulate their emotions. A key skill in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is developing **cognitive flexibility**—the ability to think about events from more than one perspective. This intervention helps young children recognize that they can choose to “think differently” about things that happen to them.

Goal: To introduce the concept of **cognitive flexibility** to young children and to provide them support in practicing cognitive flexibility--both in the therapist's office and in the children's day-to-day lives.

Recommended Age Range: Ages 4-9

Treatment Modality: Individual therapy, family therapy

Materials needed:
1. Story: Robie-Ro Goes to the Mall
2. Worksheet: Help Robie-Ro be a Careful Thinker
3. Score card: Are You a Careful Thinker?

Instructions:
1) The therapist reads the story with the child (one-on-one or with parent present.)
2) The therapist complete the worksheet with the child (one-on-one or with parent present.) This gives the child practice in generating alternative ways of thinking about events.  
(Hint: if you laminate the worksheet you can write on it with a dry-erase marker.)
3) The therapist makes a plan to set up support at the “point of performance.” Even if children are able to easily generate alternative perceptions in the therapist’s office, that does not mean that they will be able to do so in those life situations where they are having difficulty regulating their emotions and behavior. It is very important that the therapist work with the child’s parents and/or teacher, engaging them as “coaches” who provide external support for the child to practice this skill. The external support should consist of a) a cue that reminds the child to use the skills, b) recognition of the child’s success and c) encouragement on those occasions when the child is not successful (“That’s OK. You’ll have other chances to practice being a Careful Thinker. You’re still learning.”)
4) The **Score Card** (page 4) is one technique that can be used for providing external support.
5) Follow up with therapist: If needed, the therapist should provide other methods of practicing cognitive flexibility. The therapist may also need to help the parent and/or teacher fine-tune the external support so that it provides sufficient support for the child and the circumstances.

Additional information: This technique is from the forthcoming (2014) book: Simon Says Stop & Think (a companion to Simon Says Pay Attention by Daniel & Marcie Yeager.)

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**Story #1:**

Robie-Ro went with his parents Mr. and Mrs. Bot, to the mall. They shopped, went to a movie, and ate pizza. As they were leaving, they went by the pet shop. There was the cutest little puppy in the window. Robie-Ro turned to his father and said “Papa Bot, you told me that some day I could have a pet. That is the one that I want.” Mr. Bot said, “Not today, Robie-Ro. We’ve been here for 3 hours and your mother and I are tired.”

The first thought that popped into Robie-Ro’s head was: *That’s not fair! They promised I could get a pet.* With that thought in his head, Robie-Ro started to feel really upset. So he sat down on the floor and started to pout. His father grabbed his arm and tried to pull him up. Then Robie-Ro thought to himself, *That hurt. They are the meanest parents ever!* With that thought in his head, he felt angry and he started kicking Mr. Bot. Mr Bot looked at Mrs. Bot and said, “The next time we come to the mall, we are leaving him with Sitter Bot.” “Good idea,” Mrs. Bot said.

And that is just what happened. His parents took him home and put him to bed. The next time they went to the mall, they called Sitter Bot to come over to their house and they left Robie-Ro at home while they went to the mall.

**The End**

Did you like the ending of this story? Robie-Ro did not. But after his parents came back from the mall, they talked to Robie and asked him if he would like to learn how to be a Careful Thinking Robot. Robie wasn’t sure what a Careful Thinking Robot was, but he liked to learn new things, so he said Yes.

His parents said they would give him another chance to go to the mall with them. They told him that when something happens to a Careful Thinking Robot, that robot thinks carefully about what happened. He doesn’t pay attention to only the first idea that pops into his head. He slows down and figures out some other ways to think about what happened. Then he carefully chooses the best way of thinking.

Robie’s parents made a plan: They told him: “If we see you start to get upset about something, we will whisper the words, Slow Down. Those words will be our secret signal for you to remember to be a Careful Thinking Robot.”

**Story #2**

Robie-Ro went with his parents Mr. and Mrs. Bot, to the mall. They went shopping, played video games at the arcade, and had hamburgers for lunch. As they were leaving, they went by the ice cream shop. Robie-Ro turned to his mother and said “Mama Bot, we didn’t have desert after lunch. I want to get an ice cream cone. I’ll use my own money.” Mrs. Bot said, “Not today, Robie. We’ve been here for 2 hours and your grandmother is waiting for us to come for a visit.” The first thought that popped into Robie’s head was, *They are so mean, they never get me anything.* That made him feel angry and he sat down on the ground right there in front of the ice cream shop. His mother leaned over and whispered “Slow Down.”

Then Robie thought *That’s our secret signal!* And he remembered what to do to be a Careful Thinking Robot. He slowed down to see if he had any other thoughts in his head. Sure enough, there was one. He said to himself, “Well actually, they were very nice to me today. They let me play games and had lunch at my favorite restaurant.” He felt happy about that.

He remembered that to be a careful thinker he should choose the best way of thinking about what happened. He didn’t want his parents to leave him at home the next time they went to the mall. And his grandma always had cookies at her house. He smiled at his parents and said “Maybe we can get ice cream another day.” “Maybe so,” said his mom, and smiled back at him. Mr. Bot smiled at both of them.

**The End**

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Help Robbie-Ro be a Careful Thinker!

Instructions:
1) In the 1st column, write down something that might happen to Robbie. Use one of the examples below or make up your own. (You might want to read the examples to the child and then “brainstorm” for other things that sometimes happen to kids. Then let the child choose which event to use.)
   - The sitter fixes Robbie’s sandwich and forgets that he hates crunch peanut butter.
   - Robbie’s cousin comes into his room and takes his favorite toy without asking.
   - At a birthday party, a boy he doesn’t know calls him “dummy.”
   - When Robbie goes outside for recess, his best friend is already playing with someone else.

2) In the 2nd column, think of 3 different ways that Robbie can think about what happened. Then, for each thought, tell how Robbie might feel and what he might do. Continue with step 3, below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Thinking</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Doing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>What can Robbie-Ro tell himself about what happened?</td>
<td>With that thought, how might Robbie-Ro feel?</td>
<td>What will happen next? What do you think Robbie-Ro will do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) What do you think is the best way for Robbie to think about what happened? Circle your answer:  #1  #2  #3

Why? ______________________________________________________

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The story and worksheet can help children grasp the concept of, and practice skills involved in, cognitive flexibility. But to actually use those skills at the “point of performance”—the time and place where the child gets upset—the child is likely to need additional support from a caring adult. The score card serves as a visual cue that can be paired with a verbal cue (such as the words Slow Down) to help the child recall the concept of slowing down and examining alternative ways of thinking about what has happened.

The score card also provides additional motivation by recognizing the child’s success and easily recording it in a format that can be brought back to the therapist for further discussion and encouragement.

Instructions:
1. Cut out the card(s) and fold on the dotted line.
2. After reading the story and completing the worksheet, engage the child in a discussion about occasions when they need to be a “careful thinker.” Ask the child if they would like to practice being a “careful thinker.”
3. Ask the child to select a cue word (“secret signal”) that the parent (and/or teacher) can use as a reminder to “be a careful thinker.”
4. Show the child the cue card and explain that it will be used to create a record of success that can be brought back and shared with the therapist.

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