

**Hope for Children and Families**

Building on strengths, overcoming difficulties



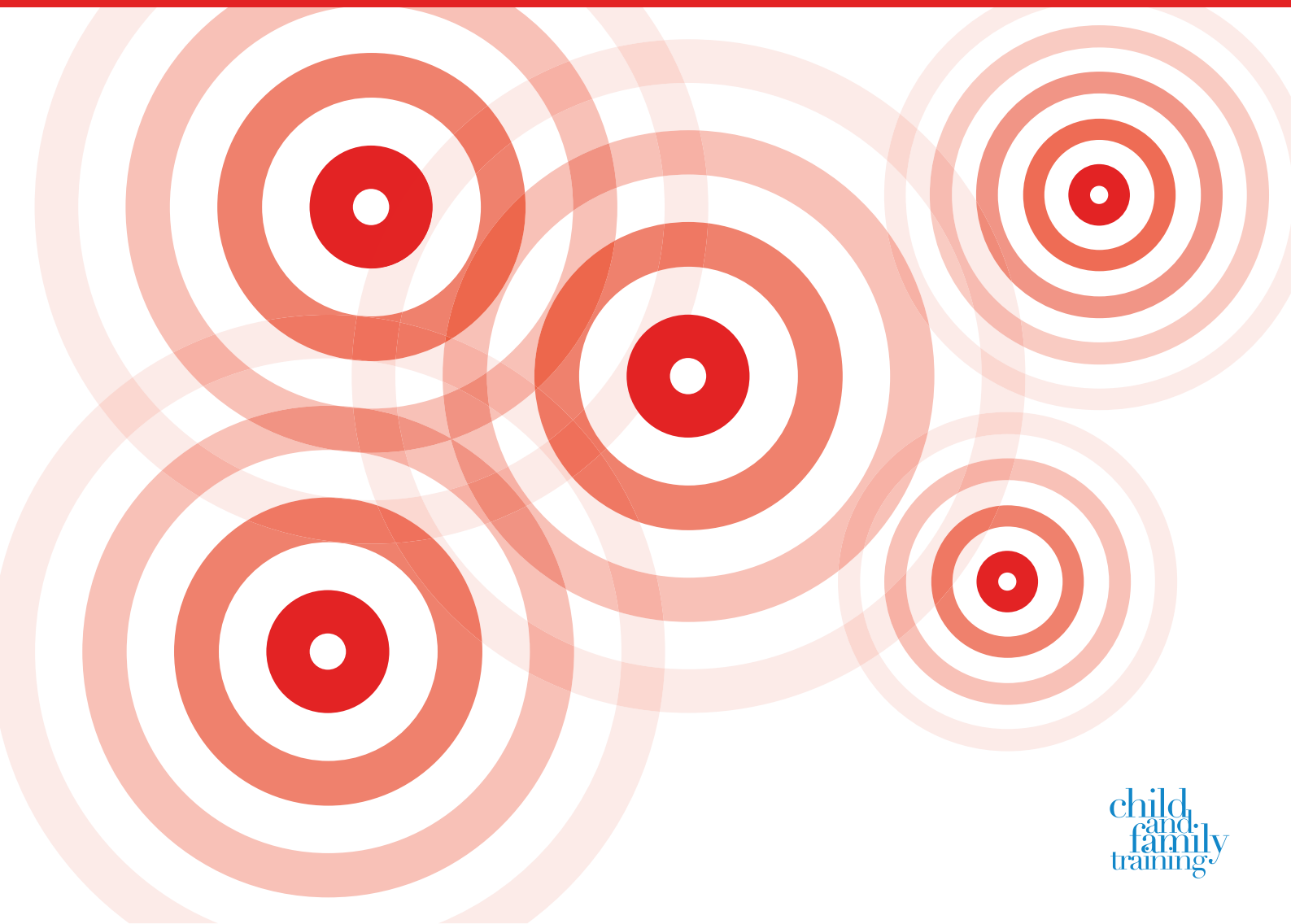
Intervention guide for practitioners

# Modifying abusive and neglectful parenting



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- We now have ways of helping children who have fears as part of a traumatic reaction. We use relaxation to overcome fears and gain confidence.
- We try to help children and young people recover from such experiences, find a way of coping with the feelings and distress they might feel and their feelings towards the people who have harmed them.

It is very helpful if parents can acknowledge the harm children have experienced because, once they have understood more about the factors which have led them to behave in a harmful way, they can then have a helpful role in supporting their children's recovery.

## Responsibility for violence

Discuss who parents feel is responsible for what has happened to their child.



When children are harmed, who do you think they blame? Do you think they blame themselves? Do children blame parents?

Would you be surprised to know that when children have been directly harmed, they often blame themselves, feel it was their fault that a parent got angry with them or said unkind things or acted in ways that caused them harm?

Why do children blame themselves? They have a limited capacity to understand what is happening to them, and they easily blame themselves.

Who is responsible for choices? Is it the child who is being provocative and difficult, or the adult who has lost their temper and hits out harder than they meant?

Children are not responsible for the choices that we as adults make, and the sorts of responses that follow. Responsibility really rests with adults – who are older, more experienced and can understand whether their action was or was not the best option for dealing with difficult situations. Do you agree?

When adults act before thinking the situation through, violence (physical, emotional and sexual) or neglectful actions occur. They are the ones responsible. Does that make sense to you?

Many parents find that hard to accept because it is easier to blame one's actions on the child's behaviour. Does that make sense?

We wondered how you as parents would feel if your children behaved in a harmful way – physically, emotionally or sexually – now or in the future. How would you feel about that? Why might that happen?

Is it possible that because of the way a child's view has been shaped, they might use force later on, they might see it as acceptable?

What do you feel about these issues? What do you and your partner's family members feel about these issues?

Some parents find it very hard to forgive themselves if they have harmed a child. Others cannot bring themselves even to allow themselves to acknowledge it because they are concerned at what they might do to themselves. Do any of those points have relevance for you?

## Being able to put things right



Many parents feel very sad and guilty when something has gone seriously wrong and their child has been harmed. They want to have the opportunity to put things right, to apologise. Is that a situation that might apply to you? How would your friends and family view this? Do you think they could go along with that or do you think they would react negatively if you or your partner thought that was a helpful way forward?

When children have begun to understand what has happened to them, and when parents have the strength to face up to and acknowledge what has gone wrong, it is helpful to have a meeting together where things can be put right, apologies are made and the possibility of a new way of relating in safety is contemplated.

We think that often it takes time to achieve. Sometimes parents would like to give a message to their children that what has happened to them is not the children's fault or responsibility, that the grown-ups have really got to take responsibility. We are all going to work to help achieve a different outcome, leaving harmful events behind. Do you agree?

### tips

It is important to remember that many parents will themselves have experienced traumatic/abusive experiences. Acknowledge this if it is raised and indicate that you are going to have a session focused on their experiences but need to concentrate on the children first.

Parents may respond to the work undertaken using this module by not being able to contemplate the harm children have experienced. There may be significant denial. The issues can then be discussed hypothetically – 'What would you expect to see if a child had been harmed in the way that the children's services team are suggesting? How would you feel if you became aware that you were responsible?'



We would now like to discuss the sorts of situations which many parents find make them feel angry, stressed, fed up and behave in ways they regret, which have been harmful, critical, angry or hurtful.

We are going to go through the last 24 hours to look at situations in detail. Looking at yesterday is a good place to start. How did the day start? Who got up first? What happened next? What happened about breakfast? Where was the child/children when you were making breakfast? Continue in a similar vein through the day to bedtime. Note situations when children were negatively affected.

It would be helpful to look at differences in the way each parent [where relevant] responds.

Parents can be very different in the way they cope with their children's behaviour. Is there a difference between you as parents and how do you account for that?

Some parents tell us that when they are 'out of sorts' with each other, or they find themselves in stressful situations together, this has an effect on the way they respond to their children. What about you?

Sometimes, factors such as work patterns, lack of support or tiredness can have an effect and that can also lead to stressful responses, irritation and difficulties in managing the tasks of being a parent. Do these types of stresses affect you?

## Parental reaction to family of origin issues

See the Recent Life Events Questionnaire.<sup>6</sup>

It is helpful briefly to review what is known from the original family assessment about the experiences of the parents in their own families of origin that may be relevant.



We find it helpful to ask parents to fill in this questionnaire [Recent Life Events Questionnaire], which includes life events that many parents have experienced – you can see listed on the left-hand side various events that might have happened to you, including serious illnesses or injuries, suffered by you or members of your family or relatives. On the right-hand side are two columns. The first column asks you whether the event has happened to you. If it has happened, please tick the box in that column. The second column asks you whether the event is still having an effect on your life. If the event is still having an effect on you, please tick the box in the second column. If the event has not happened to you, please leave the boxes blank.

<sup>6</sup> Available in *The Family Pack of Questionnaires and Scales*, [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_4079384.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079384.pdf)

When the parent or carer has completed the questionnaire discuss their ratings for different events. The ratings can be discussed in general or in terms of specific events.

### Serious illness or injury



I see that one of your immediate family has been seriously ill or injured. Can you tell me a bit more about this? I see you, or an immediate family member, has been subject to serious racial abuse, an attack or threats. Thinking about the last time this occurred could you please describe what happened.

### How parents were treated as children



Many parents tell us about the way they were treated themselves in childhood. This may have an effect on the way they parent. Perhaps they were physically punished a lot, or suffered some serious breakdowns of family relationships, physical or sexual harm or neglect. Have you had any of those sorts of experiences and what effect do you think they have had on you?

Many parents say that what was right for them as children would be right for their own children; others take the view that the last thing they would want to do is treat their children in the way they were treated. What about you?

Sometimes, as you know, this can mean that parents find it hard to be strict, or are scared to be relaxed. What about you?

Experiences can continue to have an effect, causing some stress and confusion about your parenting. Situations may get out of control and children get hurt. Does this make sense to you?

Thinking about your history of stressful events, which many parents would find stressful, what would your partner or family members say about this? Have you been affected?

There may have been times during your child(ren)'s life that have been particularly stressful – for example, their pregnancy or a particular phase of their development. How have you have been affected by these stresses?



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Module MP-M3

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# Helping parents cope with negative perceptions of their children

## Content

- The consequences of being in a stressful situation
- Parents 'leaking' to children how they are feeling
- The consequences of thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- Identifying challenging thoughts
- Practising and reporting back.

## Materials

- h **Handout**
- n **Practitioner notes**
- r **Record**
- w **Worksheet**

- How does stress in parents lead to harm of children? [MP-9] n
- ABCs of CBT [MP-10] w

# Main steps

See 'Parents coping with stress and the link with abusive and neglectful parenting' [MP-M2] as this has a clear link with this module.

Indicate that the agenda will focus on the sorts of feelings and attitudes the parents have about their children, which in turn can lead to the kinds of negative consequences that have been discussed previously.

## Discussion of the consequences of being in a stressful situation

The aim is to help parents look in more detail, from the information available in the assessment, at the sequence of thoughts, feelings and actions associated in general with stress, and specifically with the abusive action that has been perpetrated.

Initially, discuss the consequences of being in a stressful situation in general terms, and then discuss the specific consequences for them.

In 'How does stress in parents lead to harm of children?' [MP-9] a number of different possibilities of abusive action are presented. Choose statements that relate to what is known about harmful processes that have affected their children, or that may have been discussed in general terms previously.

Parents need to be very specific about the particular sequence of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and consequences that have led to harm occurring.

This has been used successfully as a way of helping parents begin to acknowledge processes once a positive relationship has been created with a therapist.



When we are stressed it is very easy for us to blame other people for why we are feeling very wound up. I'm going to describe some stressful situations.

Do you understand the idea of something becoming a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'?

This is an example of what we mean.

## Changing perceptions of children's behaviour

'ABCs of CBT' [MP-10] illustrates the way in which a parent can come to develop a set of thoughts, feelings, behaviours and convictions which result in a child being harmed. In this example a child spills some milk. In the top row, the response in terms of thoughts, feelings and behaviour results in an angry outburst. The bottom row shows an alternative way of thinking.

The ABC example is to assist a parent in thinking of examples where their child has been harmed. What were the thoughts, feelings and behaviour that followed and what were the consequences?

**n** How does stress in parents lead to harm of children?

Assessing children and families, using questionnaires such as the Parenting Daily Hassles Scale, helps focus parents on factors which lead to negative perceptions of their children – for example, thinking they deserve punishment or reprimand or to be abused as behaving that badly in a way that justifies usual interest and attention; feeling that they are responding in ways that suggest the child has an illness that needs to be investigated or the child should be in hospital.

To assess this type of process it is helpful to begin to explore with parents what it is about their children that has led them to feel and behave in ways that have been judged to be abusive, even though they as parents feel absolutely justified in their actions. Exploring factors that lead to stress, and therefore negative perceptions of their children, is a helpful way to begin to break this cycle.

**How does stress in parents lead to harm of children?**

Many people find themselves blaming their children when something goes wrong. We sometimes think that they have made the situation worse, and it is quite easy to find ourselves in the mindset that we think they are trying to make our lives miserable, almost trying to make us feel as parents. We wonder whether you have had moments like that, or whether your partner or others in the family have voiced the same sort of idea.

Caring for children is stressful. It is easy to feel quite resentful when children seem unappreciative and negative. It is easy then to lose control when children are naughty and we are stressed. This can lead to the sort of cycle of anger and harmful behaviour which has been a concern. Does that make sense for you?

It is very easy for us as parents to 'talk' to children just how annoyed we are, finding ourselves communicating negatively, or ignoring them even if they are behaving acceptably. It is easy to get into the mindset which says, 'You are good now. Why weren't you good like this before?' When we find ourselves thinking like this, children – who are very sensitive to our moods, our tone of voice, our attitude – may themselves behave more negatively.

In the way of thinking one that is familiar to you or within the family – people getting heated, perhaps unfairly, because they are seen to resemble a parent or family member who is perceived negatively?

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**W** ABCs of CBT 1 of 2

Source: Philip Glick and David Dreyfus (2002). *Children and Families: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*. A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Adapted from Box 1.1. A number of the names and descriptions appear in our previous work produced from Sage Publications. Permission requested through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

	Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviour	Consequences
Child spills milk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>He's so clumsy</li> <li>He's making so many messes</li> <li>He's had</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anger</li> <li>Disgust</li> <li>Impatience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shout child</li> <li>Make us give child more milk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refused to child attention</li> <li>Child is clumsy</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It was an accident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displeasure</li> <li>Patience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help child clean up</li> <li>Refill milk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nothing</li> <li>Milk was cleaned</li> <li>Child gets milk</li> </ul>

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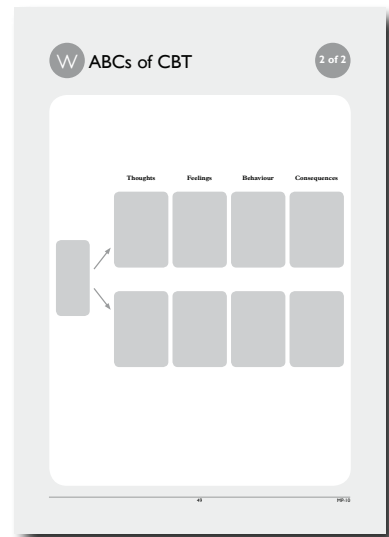
## activity

### Identifying and challenging thoughts

Using the blank version of 'ABCs of CBT' [MP-10], ask the parent to think about the sequence of events that led to harmful action.

Use the top row of the framework to write down the sequence of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and consequences the parents have described which led to harmful action, or what they imagine such a sequence might look like. Use the bottom row to discuss with the parents what an alternative explanation could be.

The second activity involves going through the previous day to look at stressful points and to track the feelings, thoughts and behaviour they provoked – particularly the way in which basic beliefs about a child being bad and deserving punishment, or being a sexual person justifying sexual responses, or showing illness behaviour justifying a belief in the child as having some form of illness, or being an individual who is provocative, negative and undermining are used to justify the idea that the child therefore deserves rejection, punishment and harshness.



We can see the sequence of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and consequences which had a harmful effect, or feelings which could lead to a child being harmed. What we need to do is think, is there another line of thinking, like the sequence when the child spilt the milk?

Could we think of some alternatives to the sorts of thoughts, feelings and behaviour which led to difficulties? What alternatives might there have been to that sequence?

Next time you find yourself with that pattern of thinking, feeling and behaving which led to harm, you could think of a different pathway to ensure that your child is safe.

Can we go through yesterday and look at the stressful points, the way you explained them to yourself, and whether there might have been a different explanation that could have led to a different action, or alternatively might have led to a harmful outcome if you had not changed direction.

We suggest that you take some of these forms home and try this out: see whether there are two or three occasions when you find yourself having the sorts of sequence of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and consequences which you realise could lead to something harmful occurring. Stand back and think whether you can substitute a more positive chain of thinking and test whether you are right in the way you now see your child's behaviour. You've learnt some relaxation stress management techniques – try to use those as well.



tips

If parents are totally denying their harmful behaviours it may be difficult to carry this through. However, it can be helpful to say to a parent, even if they cannot recall such an action happening, to put themselves in the mind of someone who was responsible for such an action, and to imagine what they must have felt and thought.

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# How does stress in parents lead to harm of children?

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To access this type of process it is helpful to begin to explore with parents what is it about their children that has led them to feel and behave in ways that have been judged to be abusive, even though they as parents feel absolutely justified in their actions. Exploring factors that lead to stress, and therefore negative perceptions of their children, is a helpful way to begin to break this cycle.

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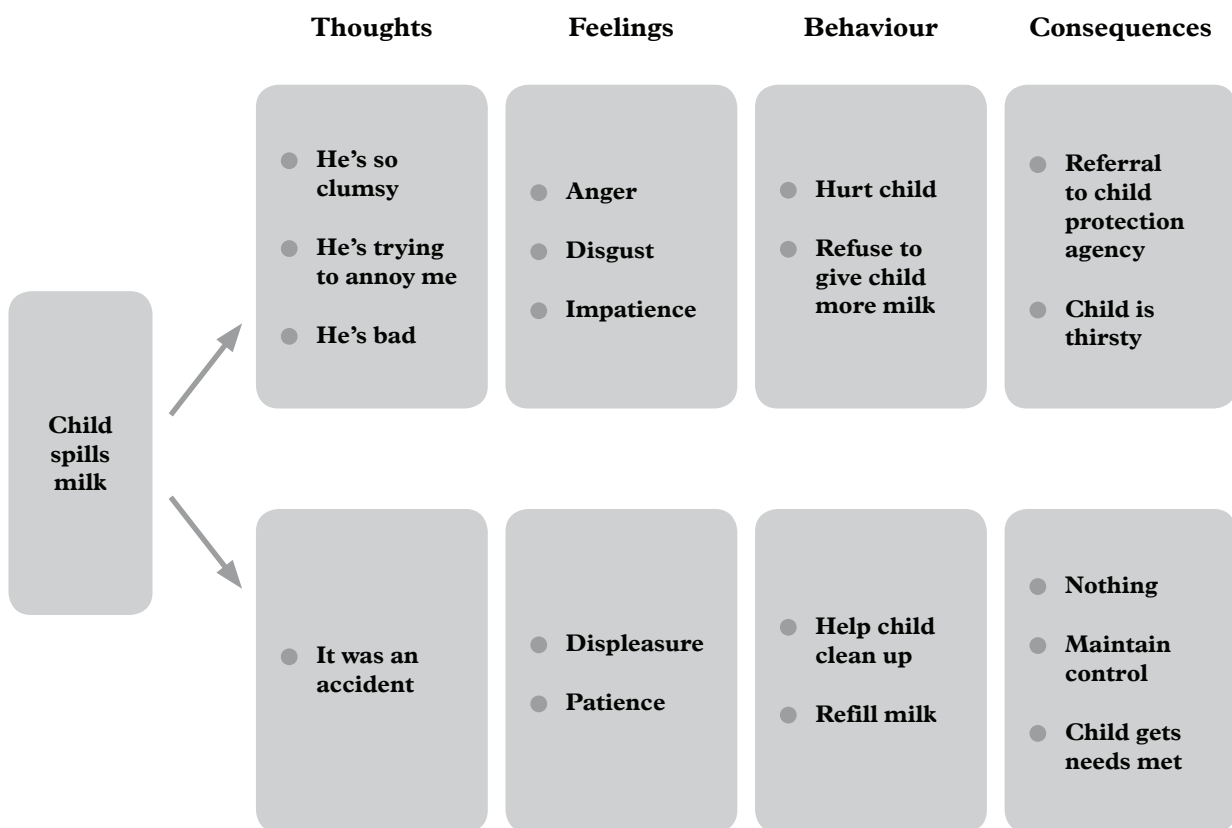


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- Caring for children is stressful. It is easy to feel quite resentful when children seem unappreciative and negative. It is easy then to lose control when children are naughty and we are stressed. That can lead to the sort of circle of anger and hurtful behaviour which has been a concern. Does that make sense for you?
- It is very easy for us as parents to 'leak' to children just how annoyed we are, finding ourselves communicating negatively, or ignoring them even if they are behaving acceptably. It is easy to get into the mindset which says, 'You are good now. Why weren't you good like this before?' When we find ourselves thinking like this, children – who are very sensitive to our moods, our tone of voice, our attitude – may themselves behave more negatively.

Is this way of thinking one that is familiar to you or within the family – people getting labelled, perhaps unfairly, because they are seen to resemble a parent or family member who is perceived negatively?

Source: David Kolko and Cynthia Cupit Swenson (2002) *Assessing and Treating Physically Abused Children and Their Families: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Adapted from Box 11.4 Samples of distortions and alternative cognitions in two situations, with permission from Sage Publications. Permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.





# ABCs of CBT

