

“Stop Being So Pushy!”

Applying the Conflict Cycle in Work with Families

Jamie C. Chambers

The Conflict Cycle model offers a practical strategy for understanding how mutual interactions can create timelines of stress, feeling, and thinking that can easily escalate into undesirable outcomes. This article applies this model to resolving conflicts which arise in family situations.

Introductory Comments

No matter the child, every parent experiences degrees of negative cycles between them and their children. I often hear parents report they have one kid of two or three with whom conflict recycles. Long, Fescer, and Wood (2001) have accurately described a dynamic called the conflict cycle which has proven beneficial to many families I have counseled over the years.

Often parents, like teachers, are baffled as to how they so easily get caught in their child's conflict cycle. The family I am about to describe for you involves a loving but busy single parent caught in a conflict cycle with a passionate Reality Rub problem (Reality Rub is an intervention for kids who distort reality). Jason is a kid who gets trapped by his own passion. Overwhelmed by his own desires and ambitions, he justifies limit testing behavior because “if I don't push, she won't listen to me!”

In this particular case, it was important to both identify the child's reclaiming pattern and help his mother clearly understand how conflict recycles and what she contributes to the conflict.

Background Information

Bobbie, a single parent, has a deep desire to help her son Jason. Jason, a small but powerful 10-year-old boy, had the cute habit of arguing with his mother's

every demand or directive. Jason's mother, a bright Lakota woman working at the local hospital as an E.R. nurse, was holding down a good job while trying to parent this young man as best she could.

The Crisis Incident

Following Jason's arrival home from school, Bobbie was in the living room relaxing from a long 12-hour shift. Jason began to badger her about going to his best friend Earl's house for the afternoon. Bobbie inquired as to whether Jason had homework. He acknowledged he did have homework. She asked if he had completed it. He said no and that he would do it after he got back. She said no and a fight ensued. After thirty minutes of screaming, tired and worn out, Bobbie conceded. Jason smiled, said thanks, and left. Later the next day, Bobbie received a message on her cell phone from Jason's teacher that he was missing homework from yesterday.

Drain-Off Stage

Bobbie called my office per a conversation she had with the school counselor. She and Jason were seated in my office waiting room two days after the most recent incident. I walked out to the waiting room and said, “You must be Bobbie and...” Before I could say anything, Jason interjected, “Who's this guy? Is he the doctor?” I inquired, “Are you Jason?” He nodded. “Nice to meet you both. Why don't you follow me!”

On the walk back to my office, I listened to Jason badger his mom about coming to see a "stupid" counselor and Bobbie inconspicuously threaten him that he had better be quiet.

JC: Sit where you would like and Bobbie tell me about what was going on just before I arrived to greet you both.

Bobbie (obviously worn out): He has been arguing with me about the need to come to counseling. He says things like they are stupid and he don't want to talk to no doctor!

Jason (interrupting her): Nuh uh! I was just trying to get her to tell me why we were coming here and she won't!

JC: (I slid an unopened Tupperware box of toys toward him.) I realize you are concerned and upset, but I need to finish listening to your mom. While you are waiting for your turn, here is something to play with.

Jason: (He kicks back the box.) I don't want your stupid toys.

Bobbie: Jason!! (threatening tone again)

JC: Jason's made a nice choice, he is too worked up to play and has decided to just sit and listen.

Jason: What EVER!

JC: Bobbie, you were saying....

Bobbie: He was arguing with me. Every decision I make he has to challenge. I feel like a worn out mule. I work hard for both of us and then I come home and work twice as hard. I can't take it any more.

Jason: So what, you're gonna leave too?

JC: Jason, what's that about?

Jason: Well, my dad left, so is she gonna leave too?

JC: Sounds like you're afraid....

Jason: If she leaves, she leaves....

JC: Bobbie, tell me more, it appears you both are tired, angry, and scared.

Bobbie (beginning to cry): I just want a good life for him. Yeah, his father walked out on us, but I believe we can still have a very good life.

JC: Thank you, Jason, for listening like you did. Now tell me your part of this....

Comments: Although in real time there was a little more drain-off, Bobbie began to show me her desires for both herself and Jason. Jason began to calm down enough to think and take his time. He eventually opened the Tupperware box of toys and chatted while he tinkered with the toys.

Timeline

Jason: I didn't know why we had to come here and she wasn't telling me, so I kept asking.

JC: What happens when you ask your mom, the way you were asking her in the waiting room?

Jason: Well... I ask and she doesn't answer and I want an answer!

JC: So you're great at going after what you want. Some people have a word for a kid like you. Do you want to know what that word is?

Jason: Yeah.

JC: Some people call kids who are determined and tough "pushy." Are you pushy sometimes with your mom?

Jason: Yeah, sometimes.

JC: Do you know what "pushy" does to others?

Jason: Nope! (still playing with toys)

JC: Mom, when Jason gets "pushy," how do you feel and how do you react to "pushy"?

Bobbie: When he's pushy, I guess I get angry and annoyed and I feel a little cornered. Probably I reach my limit, and I know it isn't right as I come back at him. I kind of want him to know I am in charge!

JC: Can you give me the most recent example of this?

Bobbie: Just a couple of days ago.

JC: You mean there are times when "pushy" is not a part of your day with Jason?

Bobbie: Yeah! We don't go around everyday, but a couple of days ago, I had been home a couple of hours. I work 12-hour shifts, 3 days on and 4 days off. He comes home from school and messes

around for a half hour or so. Then comes up with this brainstorm. He wants to go to Earl's!

JC: Two things, I want to know about—"brainstorm" and who's Earl?

Bobbie: A brainstorm is an idea that Jason comes up with that usually leads to a fight between him and me. Earl is Jason's best buddy. He's a good kid who lives a couple of houses down the street.

JC: So continue, what happened?

Jason: When do I get my turn?

JC: Yes, we will hear your mom's side and then yours.

Bobbie: So he starts in, pushing this idea of going to Earl's. I ask about his homework, because he has a little habit of forgetting some assignments.

Jason: Not all the time!

JC: Thanks, Jason! Bobbie, please continue!

Bobbie: Well, when I asked about the homework, he said he had some but, always but. And we've done it the other way—play then work and it doesn't work.

JC: Jason, what was your idea?

Jason: I wanted my mom to let me play with Earl first; then I would do my work.

JC: Then what happened, Bobbie?

Bobbie: I wanted to listen, but I knew what was gonna happen. He wanted me to endorse his idea. I wanted him to simply complete his assignment and then he'd be free to hang out with Earl.

JC: What did you figure was going to happen, Jason?

Jason: She wasn't gonna let me play with Earl and I really wanted to play with him. So I got "pushy" (he said it with a smile—it's a nonverbal clue the child has had a behavior pattern recognition reflex).

JC: And he got pushy, Bobbie; what happened to you?

Bobbie: At first, I was standing my ground, he's gonna work first and play later. But after a while I just gave up (again, while tinkering with a truck

Jason grinned). I went from determined to defeated in about 30 minutes. (Beginning to cry, she questioned.) There's gotta be another way to do this?

JC: Jason, how did you get your mom to give up so quickly?

Jason: I just wanted to play with Earl! And if I fight hard enough, she sometimes gives in.

Central Issue and Insight Stage

Comments: This timeline provided critical material in regard to understanding the dynamics of Bobbie and Jason's conflict cycle. It appears from listening to the timeline that Jason is clearly able to test and push the limits. He seems to fit the criteria for a Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention. But because this is a family meeting, I also looked at the profile of both Bobbie and Jason together. The best Reclaiming Intervention for Bobbie was to teach an adapted form of the conflict cycle. (See Figure 1 on page 182.)

JC: Let me see if I have this from both your perspectives. Bobbie, you had been home a few hours from a 12-hour shift. Jason comes home, no stress or issues, and does what he usually does. Jason, you then approach your mom about going to see Earl, your best buddy and someone you really wanted to see.

Bobbie and Jason: Yeah!

JC: Bobbie, you really wanted things to go well which means homework first, play second. So you decided to put your foot down. Jason, sensing your mom is not going to let you go to Earl's, you get "pushy." Bobbie, you hang tough for a while, but eventually give in. Jason, you go to Earl's to play for a while, then come home but forget to do your homework. How am I doing, you two?

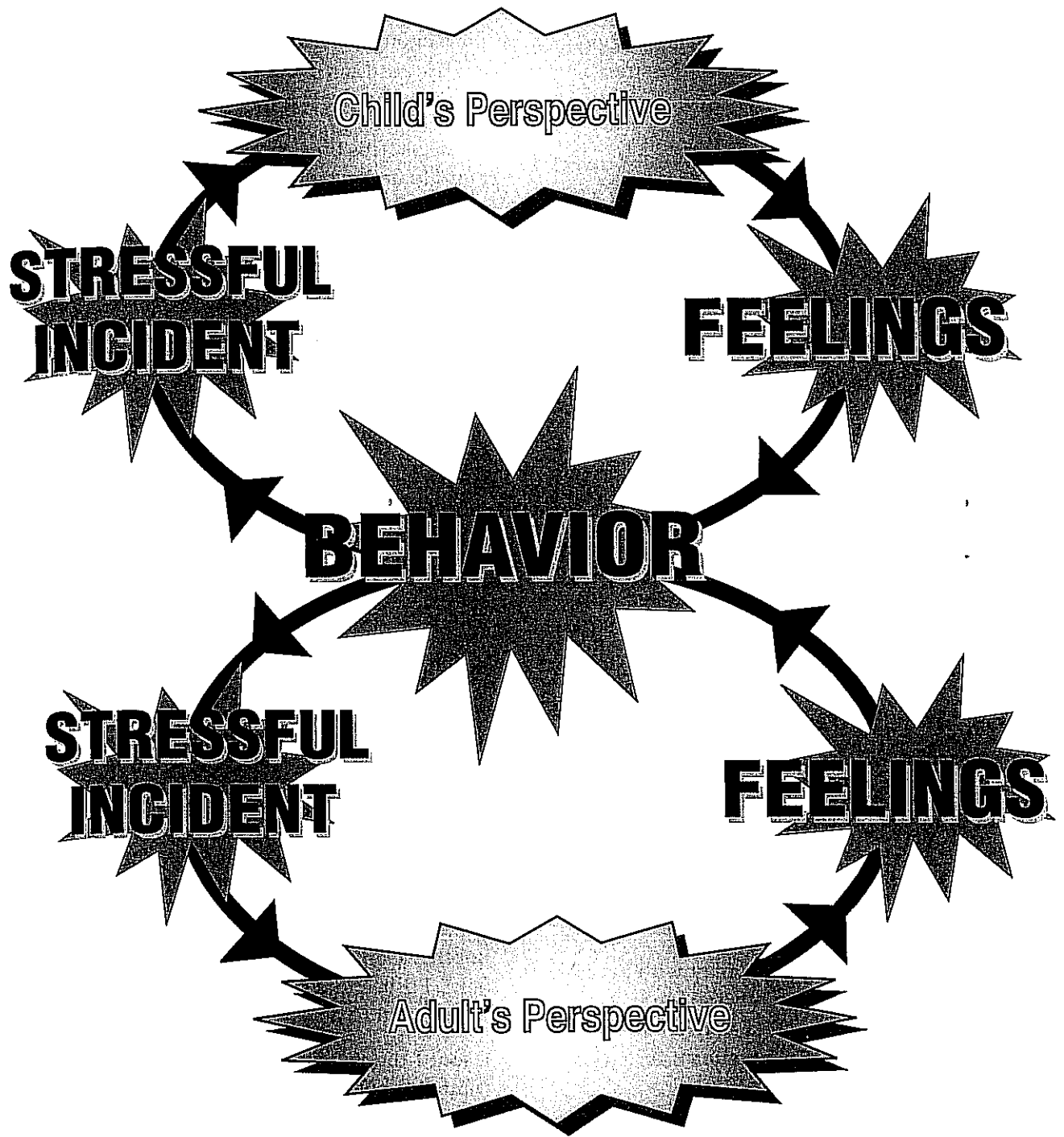
Bobbie: Don't forget I really didn't want another fight. I'd been hassling with people all day and I didn't want to do it with him too!

Jason: I didn't mean to make my mom cry, I just wanted to see Earl. I figured she wouldn't even listen to me—so I pushed.

JC: Jason, you got your way but you didn't follow through and now you're admitting you didn't intend to hurt your mom.

Jason: Yeah!

Figure 1



JC: Bobbie, tired and exhausted, you tried to stand your ground but your son outlasted you.

Bobbie (depressed): Yeah!

JC: I think I can help you both understand the pattern, if you're interested.

Bobbie: Anything to stop this fighting.

Jason: You can help me get my ideas across without fighting—right!

New Skills Stage

JC: There is this idea called a conflict cycle and it shows how family fights go round and round. (I grab a legal pad and sketch Figure 1.) Jason, your stressor was "how do I get over to Earl's house with mom's permission." You're feeling excited and determined, so you say to mom, "Can I go to Earl's and then come home and do my homework?"

Jason: Yep, that's it, just wanted to play with Earl.

JC: Bobbie, Jason's pitch becomes another stress on top of an already stressful day. You're thinking, "we have trouble with getting homework done so I'm gonna say no." You were feeling tired, annoyed, and so you push ahead. The pushing back is your part of this cycle. So far so good?

Both: Yeah.

JC: Bobbie, your resistance to Jason's idea seemed to be a stressor to him. (I draw a line to complete the cycle.)

Bobbie: How do I break this loop?

JC: You attack this loop at the point of your perception of Jason's behavior. His behavior will just be behavior, or it will be one more stressor. If it's a stressor, your brain has a program on how to proceed.

Bobbie: Can I change the program?

JC: Yeah.

Jason: What?

JC: Yes, Jason, if she changes the program, it affects you.... You need to know things are about to change.

Resolution

At this point, Bobbie and Jason were interested in what I thought the solution would be. My primary attack was the utilization of two LSCI tools:

1. Understanding the dynamics of the adapted conflict cycle.
2. Helping both Bobbie and Jason understand the dynamics of the Reality Rub Reclaiming Intervention applied in context of the parent-child relationship.

I wanted both Bobbie and Jason to understand their half of the conflict cycle. We spent time talking about Jason's favorite tactics (i.e., justifying, pushy behavior, and well-placed denial—for Jason, he could deny the facts, the impact of his behavior, or he could have chosen another approach.) We also discussed how to use a timeline and drain off with a passionate kid like Jason. We talked with Jason about his ability to be determined and focused on his wants. We also discussed his awareness of limits and how he gets flooded with passion and how that passion distorts his perception of the potential outcome.

I wanted Bobbie, specifically, to understand the dynamics of the Double Struggle Reclaiming Intervention (struggling to control her son while also controlling her own emotions). This would help her understand how and why she could be caught in Jason's conflict so easily. Like staff I have supervised, Bobbie had unrealistic expectations about raising her son:

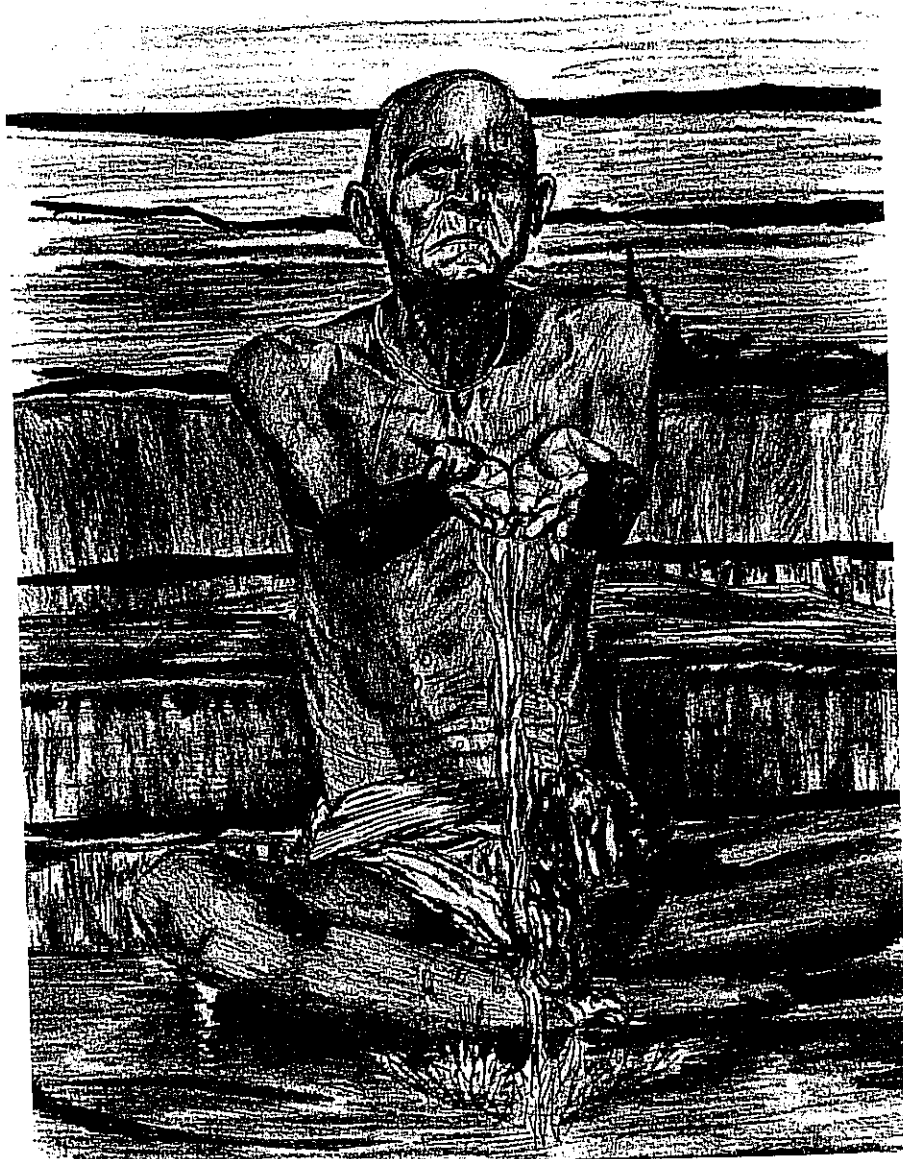
- "He should welcome order and priority!"
- "Even if it's not his idea, he should see the logic."
- "If he wants a fight, I'll give him something to push against."
- "I give up, he'll be grateful if I give in to him or maybe he will see the light."

I needed to help her become aware of her need for rest and balance. She had become so child focused, she lost herself and was not attending to her own needs. We also worked through processing her feelings. She struggled with guilt and shame related to being a single-parent mother. She has huge resentment toward her ex-husband for walking out, drinking, and workaholic behavior. I worked with her on "unpeeling the onion" with Jason. She developed a new set of time lining and listening skills.

Jamie C. Chambers, EdD, is a licensed psychologist, licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, a Certified Chemical Dependency Counselor, III, and director of Stronghold Counseling, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He may be contacted at: Stronghold Counseling Services, Inc., 625 S. Minnesota Avenue, Suite 201, Sioux Falls, SD 57104; phone: 605-334-7713; or e-mail: info@strongholdcounseling.com

REFERENCES

- Long, N., & Daniels, D. (1993). Reframing reality: Christmas at the mall. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 1*(4), 41-43.
- Long, N., & Kelley, E. (1994). The double struggle: "The butler did it." *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 2*(3), 49-54.
- Long, N., Wood, M., & Fecser, F. (2001). *Life space crisis intervention: Talking with students in conflict*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.



Art by Morgan M.
Oak Grove School,
North Oaks, MN.
Used with permission.