

# A Relational Frame Theory Analysis of Coercive Family Process

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## Abstract

This chapter provides a brief overview of direct conditioning models of coercive family process, and augments those accounts by application of relational frame theory and rule-governed behavior. Relational frame theory is a behavior analytic approach to symbolic processes—language and cognition—that extends Skinner’s analysis of verbal behavior. It provides an empirical account of indirect conditioning, and as such, gives us a way to conceptualize coercive family process—and interventions—in a more fine-grained and comprehensive way that allows us to influence this process with greater precision, scope, and depth. In this chapter, we offer a detailed description of indirect conditioning processes that may be involved in the development and maintenance of family processes, as well as some future directions for a systemic intervention to reduce coercion.

**Key Words:** relational frame theory, coercive family process, family systems, parenting, children, coercion

## Parenting, Family Systems, and Coercion

It is not surprising that people come to use punishment to alter behavior in others, as it has immediate consequences that work in the short term. When parents use punitive means to coerce a child, it often ends misbehavior quickly. On the other hand, when an oppositional child coerces a parent, the parent may “give in” by acquiescing or removing a demand. Either way, the coercive behavior, although unpleasant, is fast and effective. However, coercive practices do not work in the long term, can lead to antisocial behavior, and predict sustained negative developmental outcomes such as oppositional behavior (Smith et al., 2014), academic failure, and peer rejection, which in turn set the stage for the development of adult antisocial behavior (e.g., Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Although coercion promotes the continuation of behaviors parents would like to stop, families continue to develop and maintain this style of interacting. In part, this is because short-term consequences are more salient

and powerful than more distant, long-term ones. However, there may be other mechanisms at play, which if understood, could offer a potent means for helping families reduce coercive cycles.

## Operant Analysis of Coercive Families

*Coercion theory* (Patterson, 1982) assumes that coercive interactions begin with the issuance of a command or instruction by the parent. In turn, the child responds with coercion (i.e., aggression), in an effort to escape from the parental demand. Youngsters may also set off this cycle with oppositional behavior, as the process is bidirectional. Operant conditioning models of coercive families posit that behavior is a function of antecedents and consequences. Reinforcement delivered after a particular behavior increases the probability that that behavior will reoccur or strengthen in intensity or duration. Punishment, on the other hand, leads to less frequent and intense behavior. In other words, behavior is determined by immediate

environmental contingencies. For example, if a child's behavior "works," that is, if the parent gives in without gaining cooperation, the child's coercive behavior was successful, and will be more likely to occur in the future.

One early theory suggested that children with conduct problems would receive differential reinforcement for coercive, aggressive behaviors, compared with nonaggressive children. However, this was not found to be the case (Maccoby, 1992). Thus, Snyder and Patterson (1995) proposed that *matching law* would better explain the learning dynamics of family coercion. Matching law suggests that, given an array of two or more behavioral alternatives, what children do is a function of *relative* reinforcement (Herrnstein, 1970; McDowell, 1982; Snyder et al., 2004; Strand, 2000). For example, let us say that a child asking nicely gets attention from his mother, or a later bedtime, but shouting works better—perhaps mom responds more quickly and intensely, with undivided attention. If this happens frequently, shouting is more likely to be chosen, and will become more likely as the mother becomes more likely to give in.

Consistent with the matching law hypothesis, Snyder and Patterson found significant differences in terms of the *relative* effectiveness of coercive behavior across children with conduct problems and control children (Snyder & Patterson, 1995). In families of aggressive children, compared with coercive behavior, noncoercive behavior was unsuccessful in terminating conflict bouts with parents. The opposite was true for nonaggressive children. More importantly, the relative benefits for coercion significantly predicted sustained child coerciveness several weeks later, as well as child arrests over the following 2 years (Schrepferman & Snyder, 2002). These data show the power of the relative principle of reinforcement to predict behavior. But are there other arbiters of reinforcement potency besides relative frequencies?

Interestingly, Wahler and Dumas (1986) found that most coercive sequences appeared to arise "out of the blue," with no predictable antecedent to child aggression. In fact, only 10% of coercive exchanges between conduct problem children and their parents began with a parental command. Wahler and Dumas reasoned, therefore, that other mechanisms than those posited by coercion theory might provide an account. They suggested that child-initiated aggression might be a bid to escape from an unpredictable family environment, rather than to simply terminate demands placed on them by parents.

Thus, they argued, that children sought predictability in the family system through coercive behaviors. There were data to support this hypothesis: Wahler and Dumas found that mothers of conduct problem children behaved in a more predictable fashion when their children were coercive compared with when they were not. For example, if parents were inconsistent, or did not "do what they said," and children found this aversive, the youngsters might behave in such a way to reduce the reactive context and feelings of uncertainty. Wahler (1994, 1997) suggested that that contextual unpredictability, which was aversive for children in the family system, led to conduct problems. On the one hand, living in a chaotic environment may disrupt children's sense of safety or security; thus, engaging in behaviors that create some consistency (e.g., argumentativeness)—even if this involves harsh behavior on the part of the parents—may reduce children's sense of uncertainty. On the other hand, it may be that children are reinforced by, and therefore seek, consistent or coherent interactions with parents—whether or not those interactions are nurturing.

How children come to associate aversive interactions with a sense of predictability is perhaps not well captured in an operant conditioning model. Moreover, operant conditioning models may not fully describe parents' perception of the potency, or relative value of aversive interactions with their children. For example, why do parents (or children) find identical behaviors more or less aversive? Certainly contextual factors come into play—for example, a child misbehaving in a public place, as opposed to a private setting, could evoke greater feelings of parent embarrassment. Similarly, the same child behavior (e.g., noncompliance) may be experienced more negatively after a parent comes home from a difficult day at work, compared to a relaxed Saturday at home. Strict operant models do not appear to address the *private* experiences of parents—or children—and how these influence behavior and the social system.

### Respondent Conditioning Analysis of Coercive Families

Coercive behaviors may also be understood by using principles of respondent conditioning. The two-factor theory of anxiety posits that escape from classically conditioned aversive stimuli is maintained via operant reinforcement (Mowrer, 1939; Rachman, 1976). Parents may "give in" or respond harshly to child coercion to avoid or terminate the unpleasant emotions that arise during such

interactions. Therefore, one aspect of poor parenting is a conditioned emotional response (CER). For instance, a parent might feel a sense of dread seeing a child approach in a toy store, holding an expensive toy, based on past pairing with just this situation and an embarrassing temper tantrum. Giving in, or allowing the child to have the toy may help the parent avoid or escape the sense of dread (CER). More importantly, contextual features of the situation in which the coercion is played out may also be associated with unpleasant emotions unrelated to the interaction but that nonetheless influence it.

Consider for example a parent who has completed parent training and has skill in consistent limit-setting across multiple contexts—at home, the playground, the children’s library, the in-laws’ homes. Let’s say this mother noticed that some of the other moms on the playground excluded her. Imagine she has a history of peer rejection. Such an experience might trigger thoughts such as, “The other moms don’t like me,” or “I don’t belong.” Suppose at that moment, her child rudely asks her to stay longer at the playground and, when she says no, begins to whine loudly. They have been down this road before—this is not a new behavior, not a new setting, and mom has set appropriate limits in the past. However, at this point, despite her behavior management skills, she gives in, and lets the child do what he wants. This constitutes an over-reaction, perhaps, on her part, which happens due to her private experience (thoughts of rejection) and need to reduce the subsequent distress.

Consider another example of a child who has been bullied and made fun of for not having the “right” brand-name clothes. At the mall, he may engage in whining, demandingness, argumentativeness, or other means of coercing his parents to purchase the “right” pair of shoes or jeans. One might argue that rather than working for an instrumental reward (appetitive = the shoes/jeans), he’s working to reduce the aversive experience of being bullied (negative reinforcement) through getting the shoes. Neither classical nor operant models explain how or why the *same behavior* leads him to different private experiences, potentially different consequences, and how he values, and thus, responds, to those consequences.

Behavior shaped by avoidance tends to become narrow, rigid, and insensitive to context, and the same appears true of coercive interactions. With regard to the two examples above, both mother and child are attending only to cues signaling unpleasant feelings, often not consciously accessible. Neither

mother nor child is attending to any other potentially relevant or reinforcing stimuli. For instance, neither might notice that it is a nice day, that this might be a pleasant outing with parents, and so on. In short, both become *insensitive* to other cues that might be helpful, as all of their behavior and attention is captured by avoidance of their own painful private experience.

These types of learning paradigms, involving both classical and operant learning of rigid and maladaptive response patterns are often referred to as *indirect conditioning models*. These, in concert with a respondent conditioning model, suggest that treatment might be augmented by addressing parents’ awareness and acceptance of negative arousal elicited by aversive child behaviors in addition to targeting operant parent behaviors of avoidance (Vasta, 1982). The goal is to increase behavioral flexibility in the presence of CERs on the part of parents (Cavell & Strand, 2002), such that parents may engage in more effective responses to child coercion. Parents may need to first learn to accept and simply experience, without reacting, feelings of embarrassment in the presence of a child’s behavior problems, before being able to enact a more mindful behavior management solution.

### Relational Frame Theory

Relational frame theory (RFT) is an indirect conditioning model that provides an account of indirect verbal conditioning processes. Specifically, RFT describes how language processes enable us to be in the presence of painful or stressful stimuli psychologically, even when the stimuli are not physically present. Responses to stimuli may be *directly* (as in the case of classical or operant conditioning) and/or *indirectly* acquired. Humans interact with the world through the use of language, for instance, through relating encountered stimuli to other previously experienced events. Thus, encountered stimuli may gain their psychological properties indirectly, through verbal or *symbolic*, means, without an individual having any direct contact with them. For instance, children may learn not to touch flames not through direct experience of being burned, but rather, through repeated phrases from a parent, “Don’t touch. Hot. Ouch!” Moreover, if children are trained not to touch flames in the presence of, say, candles on a birthday cake, they will likely generalize their understanding to avoid flames in the context of the stove, a lighter, or fireplace. Such judgments are therefore *derived*, or made about stimuli based on their relations to other stimuli.

Simply put, *derived relational responding* allows us to approach or avoid stimuli not merely based on any absolute or observable properties that have been directly experienced but via their indirectly acquired stimulus properties.

Data suggest that humans engage in derived relational responding because of their exposure to reinforcement contingencies in the socioverbal community. Children begin to learn this skill in early toddlerhood. For example, at around the age of 18 months, children learn the relation of coordination (sameness) between words and their referents (e.g., the spoken word “ball” is the same as an actual ball; see Lipkens, Hayes, & Hayes, 1993). Consider how parents teach young children the names of objects—or more specifically, how to *relate* the names of objects with the actual objects. Mothers may point toward a particular object and name it, repeating this over and over again, every time they and their child come into the presence of that object. Eventually, the child learns to point to the object when the mother requests that. Similarly, the mother might hold up a ball and ask, “What is this?” Over time and repetitions, the child learns to say “ball” in the presence of the object. When this occurs, the mother provides immediate reinforcement, perhaps by saying “Yes, that’s the ball!” or actually giving the child the ball. Yet what is happening here is more important than simply learning a word: *it is that children are taught the behavior of relating.*

Children gradually learn increasingly complex patterns of derived relational responding, such as relating stimuli in terms of bigger/smaller (comparison), different from (distinction), and deictic relations (for a review, see Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). In the case of inconsistent limit setting, if dad is “strict,” children may derive that they should ask mom, who might by comparison be less so. Furthermore, once things come to be related, they tend to share psychological properties—the technical term for this is *transformation of function*. An experience that has previously been neutral can suddenly take on new attractive or aversive qualities when related to something else. For instance, if a parent perceives a child as angry, and anger is related to noncompliance, the child’s expression of anger alone may elicit the parent’s annoyance, or in operant terms, evoke a parent’s lax behavior (Backen-Jones, Whittingham, Coyne, & Lightcap, in press). In this way, elements in a “relational frame” come to have particular functions or meanings based on an individual’s particular learning

history or context (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, 2012). In families, the coercive behavior of each individual may not be regulated by any observable trigger but rather by symbolic processes dictated by a historical context of covert, private experiences. This can help explain the differing “potency” and meaning of particular stimuli in coercive processes. Moreover, it may also account for the inflexibility and intransigence of coercive cycles that arise from weak, ineffective contextual control over relational learning processes.

### Derived Relational Responding and Maladaptive Behavior

Relational frame theory suggests that a thorough understanding of behavior would be incomplete without accounting for private events (Hayes et al., 2001). Although an extensive review of this literature is not within the scope of this chapter (the reader may see Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, McHugh, & Hayes, 2004), it is important to consider how these processes may powerfully influence the development and maintenance of coercive family processes. The contextually controlled relational nature of language as articulated by RFT suggests we should attempt to change how parents respond to their private experiences within a coercive context. Thus, interventions designed to break down the hold that derived relational responding has on an individual’s psychological inflexibility may be useful in halting coercive cycles.

Two elements central to psychological inflexibility are *cognitive fusion*, or “excessive or improper regulation of behavior by verbal processes,” (Hayes, Wilson & Strosahl, 1999, p. 304; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis 2006), and *experiential avoidance*, or the attempt to change, minimize, or otherwise control unwanted psychological experiences (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Specifically, individuals who are “fused” with their thoughts and overreliant on experiential avoidance engage in rigid and inflexible patterns of behavior. These repertoires tend to have a single goal: to minimize one’s experience of psychological discomfort. Engagement in this goal results in a diminished attention to other features of an environmental context, and thus, a reduced ability to pursue valued goals effectively.

There are some data for this in the parenting literature. Correlational studies have linked parent experiential avoidance and fusion with harsh and coercive parenting behaviors as well as increased internalizing and externalizing problems in children

(Shea & Coyne, 2011). In a sample of 145 mothers of preschool children, mothers who reported more experiential avoidance also reported more depression, parenting stress, child behavior problems, and using more harsh, punitive parenting strategies. Further, the relationship between maternal depression and parenting stress was partially accounted for by experiential avoidance. Parenting stress, in turn, was a significant predictor of inconsistent and punitive parenting practices (Shea & Coyne, 2011).

The work cited above explored the “midlevel” term *experiential avoidance*. However, there is also support regarding derived relational responding in parents. Murrell, Wilson, LaBorde, Drake, and Rogers (2009) were curious about how difficult it might be for parents to integrate positive information about their children if those children had come to have aversive psychological properties. She suggested that when participants were required to form new equivalence classes (e.g., good) that were discrepant from the emotional valence of preexisting classes (e.g., bad), they would acquire these with greater difficulty. Thus, Murrell et al. posited that stressed parents, who likely had constructed equivalence classes around their children’s negative behaviors (e.g., “tantrums”) would likely have greater difficulty forming stimulus equivalence classes involving more positive classes (e.g., “praising good behavior”). She found that relative to nonstressed parents and nonparents, highly stressed mothers took longer and made more errors when learning to pair positive parenting stimuli with positive child behaviors. However, they responded more quickly and accurately to negative child behaviors than other participants. Murrell suggested that if such classes are difficult for these parents to form, this may result in difficulty applying parenting skills that are learned.

### Rules and Rule-Governed Behavior

If relational or symbolic processes are important in the acquisition and application of parenting skills—especially in the relative rigidity or inflexibility of responding—this suggests that rule-governed behavior is at play here as well. Rule-governed behavior (RGB) can be said to be occurring when a person is behaving in accord with a “rule” as opposed to contextual feedback such as consequences (Hayes, 1989). From an RFT perspective, a “rule” can be conceptualized as an established relational network that defines and/or alters the stimulus functions in the environment. For example, a child might learn not to steal a cookie when dad is around because

dad has said “Steal a cookie and you’ll get a spanking.” If dad weren’t present, stealing a cookie would have led to a potentially pleasant outcome. But with dad there (or even if a child has internalized the dad “rule”), stealing a cookie would lead to aversive consequences. Pivotal, as in this example, a speaker can “pass on” a rule to another as long as the speaker and listener are from the same verbal community and as such share an understanding of the symbolic cues being used.

Relational frame theory identifies three classes of rules based on how they function: *tracks*, *phys*, and *augmentals*. All three function as antecedents. *Tracking* refers to RGB under the control of “a history of coordination between the rule and the way the environment is arranged independently of the delivery of the rule” (Hayes et al., 2001; Torneke, 2010). In other words, if a rule has in the past accurately described a situation (frame of coordination, e.g., fire = hot), that history directs one’s behavior. A listener who avoids flames, having internalized the rule that fire is hot, is said to “track.” In other words, behavior that is governed by contact with actual contingencies in the environment is called “tracking.”

*Pliance*, on the other hand, refers to socially mediated reinforcement that is obtained when one adheres to a rule. When our behavior is “governed” by a rule, it becomes reinforced for consistency with that rule. For example, if a mother says, “You look hungry. Finish your dinner,” and a child obeys regardless of whether they are or are not actually hungry, the child is said to “ply.” Pliance refers to following rules not because they accurately specify contingencies but because in the past, adherence has led to social reinforcement from the rule giver. Pliant behavior therefore may persist even when the consequences of the action are harmful or ineffective because the person is attending to the social consequences not the consequences of the action itself.

Consider the following example of coercion. A parent may have the “rule” that “My son cannot be disrespectful to me at this party.” In the presence of this thought, the parent may engage in harsh or punitive strategies to nip disrespect in the bud. In addition, he or she may be hypervigilant to cues of this disrespect at the party, failing to notice other behaviors like prosociality, or compliance. Because the parent is “plying” to the rule, it may not even occur to him or her to consider the child’s context or to use strategies that might have positive long-term benefits (Backen-Jones et al., in

press). While parental action triggered by pliance might preempt the aversive interaction in the short term, such parenting behavior will not improve the incidence and intensity of outbursts over the long term. The parent in this situation likely perceives the party as aversive due to focusing narrowly only on negative behavior and the need to control it. As you might imagine, this proves a very difficult context in which to engage in positive interactions or “catch your child being good,” as is encouraged by many parent-training programs (Backen-Jones et al., in press).

*Augmenting* refers to “rule-governed behavior due to relational networks that alter the degree to which events function as consequences” (Hayes et al., 2001; Torneke, 2010). Augmentals, then, are derived rules that give value to a particular consequence. For instance, a parent might say to a child, “If you eat your vegetables, you will grow into a strong and fast soccer player.” Or a gang leader might say, “If you get arrested, you are part of the ‘gang,’” or “If you carry a gun, you are one of us.” These “rules” specify as yet uncontacted consequences and change the value of a stimulus from something distasteful to something more tolerable because it is verbally or symbolically linked with a desired outcome.

Relational frame theory specifies two kinds of augmentals (Hayes et al., 2001; Torneke, 2010). *Formative augmentals* are rules that establish a particular consequence as either reinforcing or punishing. *Motivative augmentals* are rules that specify the probability that a particular consequence will function as a reinforcer in a particular situation or context. Simply put, formative augmentals establish the reinforcing properties of a stimulus or event and motivative augmentals increase the reinforcing value of that event. So, a parent engaged in a parent-training program might be told “Practicing these skills consistently will support your child.” Thus, practicing skills has been framed as “supportive” to one’s child, which this parent finds reinforcing. This illustrates a formative augmental. However, when this parent gets to the planned ignoring segment of the program, the work has gotten harder, and more emotionally draining. The instructor might say, “Consistent practice of these skills, even when it is incredibly difficult, is a powerful support for your child.” This reflects a motivative augmental, because it has increased the value of “consistent practice” as meaningful and “powerful,” especially in the context of challenging situations characterized by emotional strain.

## Information in Context: Derived Rules and Family Functioning

Parents may harness the power of RGB by creating verbal contingencies in the family. For example, a mother might say, “If you don’t do your homework, you will lose TV”, whereas another will say, “After your homework, you can watch TV.” The former constructs an aversive motive where the child focuses on “work”; the latter constructs an appetitive one where the child sees “opportunity.” However, the actual contingency is exactly the same: no homework, no TV; homework done, TV time earned. The construction of verbal rules, then, specifies what contingencies function as coercion (child avoids an unpleasant outcome), or reinforcement (child anticipates a pleasant outcome). It may be helpful to “reframe” verbal contingencies such that children have something to *work for*, rather than an aversive to avoid.

Relational frame theory may also specify the relative importance of a derived consequence. For instance, a parent may scold a child for not sharing, or in other words, delivering a consequence that is designed to act as a punisher. If “scolding” is in a comparative frame with other punishers that the child may perceive as worse, such as time-out or loss of a favorite toy or privilege, then a simple scolding may seem relatively mild, and thus may not function as intended. While this is, in principle, similar to matching law, the difference here is that the relative potency, or intensity and meaning, of a consequence may be *derived*, rather than learned directly.

The implication of symbolic processes and RGB is that the function of consequences in terms of motivation or instruction is determined by an individual’s own derived relational history. If that history is not understood or considered, the influencer may find themselves getting apparently paradoxical results. Imprecise verbal interventions may lead to contrary or even oppositional and countercontrolling behavior.

In coercive families, parents who have a history of using punishers are usually in a frame of coordination with “bad” or “hurtful.” Children may derive that parents using punishment are “bad” or “hurtful.” As a child grows up, he may derive that other authority figures, such as teachers or bosses, are also “bad” things to be avoided or survived. This can be observed in behavior therapy with conduct-disordered children. When the parent, or authority figure, alters his instructions to be more positive, the child still experiences the guidance itself as aversive (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998; Gershoff,

2002; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). This makes it difficult for clinicians working with parents who are frustrated by the lack of change in behavior even though they have begun using more prosocial strategies.

### Tracks Versus Plys: Sources of Information

Just as coercive practices can lead to a view of authority that renders it as aversive, RFT also highlights that verbal processes can be utilized by caregivers in such a way that they are damaging to social development and functioning. In the case of coercion in parenting, we are largely seeing pliance at work. A “ply” focuses the learner’s attention on the rule giver for feedback. In essence, the rule follower must look to the rule giver to establish whether a rule is correctly followed. Another way to talk about this is in terms of “fusion,” or adherence to a rule regardless of whether the consequences specified by the rule are accurate. In coercion, the child learns that the reason to follow a rule is not because of how helpful it is in specifying potential growth or learning opportunities but rather to avoid punishment (e.g., “Do it, or else.”). In coercive families, this is the rule’s only function.

The outcome of such a process is damaging. First, it teaches the child that instructions are only to be followed when accompanied by threat. Second, it teaches that the main motivation for following rules or being compliant is avoidance of an outcome, as opposed to learning strategies for novel skills or rewarding experiences (e.g., If you don’t do your homework you lose TV vs. If you complete homework, you earn TV). Third, it teaches that the purpose of information from authority is only to benefit the authority figure, not to empower or increase the functioning of the shared relationship (e.g., Do this because you’re told to vs. do this because it will allow us to have more playtime together). Lastly, by using the symbolic system in such a coercive way, the parent is actually contorting the adaptive process so that the child does not learn to attend to the information that should refine, inform, and improve on understanding in such a way that fosters development. This is fusion at work: adherence to a rule that renders children insensitive to other environmental contingencies. In essence, the coercive use of the symbolic system leads to inflexible behavior in the learner and hinders development: It promotes only pliance and impairs the development of tracking and, therefore, learning adaptive behavior.

The damaging impact of pliance as a result of coercive parenting can be seen in a recent case. Two boys (5 and 7), both referred for ADHD, had been raised by a father who believed the “only way to teach respect” was through punishment, and his primary strategies were aggressive language and spanking. Despite his reliance on punishment, both boys were highly oppositional and disorganized at home and almost impossible for teachers to manage. In an attempt to show the father that heavy reliance on punishment was not necessary for respect, the psychologist shared his own upbringing where he respected his father’s words but had only been smacked once in that entire time. The father could not imagine how this could have been achieved, but was curious. Moreover, both boys, upon hearing this story, concluded that the single smack “must have been very hard.”

The boys’ view shows they could see no other reason to respect the authority system unless fear and threat was present. Moreover, this frame was extended to their behavior at school as well. Neither of the boys attended to the social feedback, systems, or norms that guide, shape, and inform behavior. Thus, they could not learn how cooperation could be functional beyond the authority figure’s immediate consequences. Their resulting behavioral presentation was challenging, oppositional, and chaotic, and they were difficult to motivate to stay on task. Teachers could not engage them in any task without threats. In social contexts, they resorted to bullying when peers did not behave as they wished. Overall, they saw teachers, parents, and any other authority or social system as something to “put up with” or defy. They also used exclusively coercive behavior to force others to fit their expectations. In fact, they appear to have derived the rule “fighting earns me respect and respect gets me what I want.”

This case shows the greatest danger of coercive processes in social development. Children become less able to learn from the many other sources of feedback in the social environment, and this makes them less adaptable. Then they use the same coercive social strategies on others to create a social context they understand, one where there is someone in control and someone is forced to follow or they avoid those social contexts altogether. Teachers intending to inspire the boys may respond to their behavior in such a way as to become disciplinarians. Employers seeking to help them develop may become more harsh or punitive, in response to coercive behavior on the part of their employees. These cycles, developed

in the coercive family and extended to the larger social world, diminish future adaptive social and developmental experiences. The final result is behavioral inflexibility (e.g., continued use of coercion) and an increasingly impoverished ability to adapt, learn, and develop (i.e., decreased tracking, and therefore decreased awareness of potential reinforcement opportunities for more adaptive behavior).

The systemic outcome of a coercive upbringing using pliance and the inflexibility it creates is that it is harder for the child to learn new ways to respond and not simply focus on the source and nature of threat. The outcome of this narrow and skewed developmental process is a learner who only attends to threatening information sources and only shows adaptive change under such conditions. This may result in a rigid, coercive pattern of responding in the child's broader social world—in school, peer and dating relationships, and the workplace (e.g., Chamberlain and Patterson, 1995; Stoolmiller, Duncan, Bank, & Patterson, 1993). Parents, too, may find themselves in a self-created trap. They have taught the child to only respond to and value coercive interaction, and this in turn, justifies to the parent that such interaction is appropriate, as it is “the only thing that works.”

### Fusion with Parenting Rules

Fusion is another way to talk about pliance and is defined as becoming overregulated by verbal content. Fusion with thoughts that may function as rules interferes with attention to context, and taking feedback from that context to shape more flexible and adaptive development. Simply put, it means experiencing your thoughts as *literally* true. For instance, a parent might think, “I’m an utter failure as a parent,” or “my kid is a brat,” and experience this as a truth, even though it may not reflect objective reality.

Consider the case of the father who thought respect meant “doing what you’re told.” When discussing interactions at home, the clinician realized that the father viewed any form of questioning or response other than compliance as a sign of disrespect. He explained that he was raised with the rules “your father is always to be respected” and “respect means doing what you are told without question.” In acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; an intervention developed based on RFT basic research), we would say the father was “fused” with the rule about respect and his role as father. In RFT terms we would say *respect* is in a frame of

coordination with *father* and with “*doing what one is told.*” It is possible to derive many implicit rules, such as being able to call oneself a “father” requires compliant children. So any noncompliance, thus, denies him the ability view himself as a “father” in the way he had been raised to see the role. This transforms stimulus functions so that all that the father attends to is the children’s noncompliance, since it is threatening to him. Thus, any positive behavior the child displays would go unnoticed.

These derived responses have significant consequences not only for the nature of the parent–child dynamic in the moment but also for its development over time. The father only focuses on the form of the behaviors in which the children engage. He does not attend to the context or the function of their behaviors. He also only draws their attention to what he will do if they do not comply, not to what contextual or systemic benefit there is for them in complying or following his instruction. So if the children seek to question him appropriately, are confused by his instruction and do not behave as he wants, or ask for more information when needed, the father does not notice and punishes the children. Yet in doing so he is actually punishing what could be, or lead to, *prosocial* and adaptive behavior.

As an example of this process, consider a recent case in our clinic where a young girl (age 5) was referred for highly avoidant, anxious, and oppositional behaviors with her mother. Her mother relied on yelling, time-out, and spanking as a means of enforcing her authority. Her daughter used similar strategies toward her mother, and home grew increasingly toxic. Behavioral observations of the mother and child indicated that the mother’s instructions were mostly negative (i.e., “stop,” “don’t,” “no”), consistent with observational assessments associated with parent–child interaction therapy (PCIT; Eyberg & Robinson, 1982; for reviews see Eyberg, Nelson, & Boggs, 2008; Pearl, 2009). The child was given no information about *what* behaviors to engage in, nor *why* those behaviors might be desirable in the family system, thereby limiting her ability to learn more adaptive responses.

Near the end of a session, the child left the clinic room to go to play in the adjacent room. However, she left the door slightly ajar. The mother forcefully instructed the child back and stated “shut the door,” but the child hesitated and asked, “Why?” The mother responded, “Just shut the door and do what you are told!” The child froze and refused to meet her mother’s eyes. The interaction continued and escalated, leading the



mother to describe it as an example of how “bad” her daughter was and how it was impossible to be a “good mother” to her.

At this point, the psychologist asked the mother why she wanted the door shut, and why she thought her daughter wanted it ajar. After some thought, she stated she wanted it shut so her daughter would not hear what she said but suspected her daughter would want it open so she could access her mother easily. The psychologist asked the mother to check this with her daughter and then explain her own reasoning to her. She was then asked to outline a way her daughter could have her needs met, using an educational, as opposed to aggressive tone. The mother did so. Once the child confirmed, with a slight head nod, that she wanted to easily access her mother, the mother stated, “If the door is open, I cannot hear properly. However, if you close it I will sit closer to the door and you can come in without knocking whenever you need to.” This immediately led to the child closing the door. The above example shows how fusion with a rule (“children should be compliant”) leads to insensitivity to context and results in the underuse of symbolic processes. The mother believed that a “good daughter does what she is told” and viewed her noncompliance as evidence that she was “not good.” Consequently, the mother focused only on the fact she had given an instruction and it had not been followed as stated. In so doing she failed to notice the child was anxious about access to her, and thus her child’s efforts at seeking a solution were punished as “noncompliance.” This led to an escalation in coercion and denied the child the opportunity to learn about ways to develop coping and social skills for navigating such moments. Moreover, the child, given the command “Just do what you are told” experiences the mother only as a threat to be avoided and has no opportunity to learn how to reach a mutually agreeable solution. Yet when the mother focused more on identifying context and function, she then used the symbolic system correctly to inform and guide, so the child was able to make adaptive decisions. The child, in turn, experienced the mother as a richer source of information and was more willing to comply. By asking the parent to attend to the context and allow for information flow between her and the child, the psychologist had interrupted the fusion with the rule and the subsequent coercive dynamic.

### Experiential Avoidance

Fusion with rules about parenting explains why parents may foster a coercive dynamic, in spite of

contextual evidence indicating it is a harmful practice. However, experiential avoidance also points toward a reason for the occurrence of these practices. The avoidance of unpleasant emotions and events is not necessarily maladaptive, and may be clearly sensible at times. However, when a person identifies ~~rigid~~ avoidance of unpleasant feelings as more important than the efficacy of their actions, then adaptive functioning cannot be shaped by contextual consequences and behavior becomes rigid and inflexible (e.g., Coyne & Wilson, 2004).

Consider our example of the mother and daughter above. This mother did *not* come from a coercive background. She was an only child who had largely been raised with minimal conflict and reported a happy upbringing. Moreover, while she did have rules about being a “good mother,” one would expect the experience with the door (replicated many more times in the clinic) would have defused that rule, thereby breaking the coercive dynamic. Yet, in spite of having prosocial models from her own childhood to draw on, as well as clear evidence and practice at using symbolic and behavioral systems effectively in the clinic, her coercive behavior continued.

The clue to why this mother could not change her behavior can be found in her statements “I hate how angry she gets me” and “I can’t stand conflict.” The mother had not experienced many demanding or challenging contexts throughout her life and found them unpleasant to experience. Not surprisingly, when her daughter first started to challenge her by screaming or challenging her, she would simply give in to her daughter to avoid feelings of upset. The goal was clear, *to end the conflict as quickly as possible* because it distressed the mother so much. The goal was not to teach the child about boundaries or more socially appropriate ways to meet her needs.

When the psychologist asked her why she did not engage in more constructive exchanges such as the incident with the door, she explained that she found such exchanges frustrating as they “took too long” or on other occasions she was concerned that the exchange would lead to more conflict. In this case, experiential avoidance led to the coercive dynamic and the dynamic then demanded ever-increasing forms of coercive behavior as conflict strategies became the only interaction style being developed and maintained between her and her daughter. Thus, in spite of not wanting conflict, experiential avoidance actually created more. One intervention that would be helpful here would be to shape awareness of and nonreactivity to verbal rules to create a choice in how to behave or mindfulness.

## Implications of a Relational Frame Theory Account of Coercion in Family Systems

The RFT account of how symbolic processes may create a self-maintaining coercive system extends and complements the role of social environmental processes articulated in traditional behavioral models of coercion. Furthermore, we believe that relational learning has significant implications for better understanding the effects of coercion on development and future functioning and that a focus on relational learning in intervention may enhance our capacity to reduce coercive social processes and to enhance constructive social alternatives.

### Development

The role of the family in social development has long been observed (see Novak & Pelaez, 2003, for discussion). Largely, the focus of these studies and analyses has been on social modeling, attachment, and use of consequences via parenting strategies and/or family systems (see Grusec, 2011, for discussion). The functions of symbolic systems in social development have not received systematic and comprehensive theoretical and empirical attention. However clues for the role of symbolic processes can be seen in research on the development of identity, norms, and social narratives.

One example of the symbolic processes can be seen in the literature on theory of mind. Researchers have increasingly identified that how one learns to theorize about others “minds” is a predictor of social behavior and empathy (McHugh & Stewart, 2012). Relational frame theory has identified that these abilities are very much a product of relational framing, specifically the use of perspective-taking frames (*deictics* is the technical term; for example I-YOU, HERE-THERE, NOW-THEN). Through multiple exemplars of these types of frames, children acquire the perspective-taking ability inherent in theory of mind. If children have poor perspective-shifting abilities, they are more likely to be frustrated with the behavior of others and engage in antisocial behavior (Mohr, Howell, Gerace, Day, & Wharton, 2007; van den Bos et al., 2014). Perspective-taking is the foundation of empathy, without which it is not possible to understand or be moved by the experience of others. Links between a lack of empathy and antisocial behavior, such as aggression or coercion, are well documented.

Coercive parenting, explicitly, does not consider perspective of “other” in the social dynamic. Rather, the focus is on behavior and punishment alone. The function or motivation for the follower of the

instruction is not considered beyond how it may be used to identify punishers (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1998; Nelson & Crick, 2002). Furthermore, to many parents fused with concepts of “respect” or “compliance,” a child’s sharing of their own perspective is seen as noncompliant or disrespectful. When such learning opportunities for perspective shifting in language and interaction do not occur, a pivotal skill needed for constructive social functioning is not acquired.

Not only is the pivotal perspective shifting aspect of theory of mind damaged by coercive parenting, so is the “theory” itself. The way we conclude what a person may be thinking is largely governed by the narratives and stereotypes we have for human behavior and interaction (Slaughter, Peterson, & Mackintosh, 2007). If children are not raised to understand why an instruction is given and how the parental information leads to better social interaction, they will be denied pivotal adaptive narratives about human interaction. Furthermore, the narratives they do acquire are based only on the understanding of coercive motivations and explanations. This leads to a very narrow “theory” of mind and, thus, limited motivation to work collaboratively toward shared group outcomes.

For example, if a parent says to a child, “Stop being so noisy” in an aggressive tone, or even has explicitly stated, “You get any noisier and I will get angry,” a narrative for human functioning is also being presented. In short the message is “people tell you what to do when they are angry or frustrated with you” and if the parent has minimal interaction with child other than when angry or frustrated, then that narrative is not open to a great deal of contrary evidence. Moreover, the parent has expressed emotion as the main reason for interacting, when in fact emotion is a component and not the main reason at all for the instruction. The reason for asking children to be quiet is that in a shared space it makes communication difficult for all parties and, much like sharing a toy, this must be respected for all to benefit. Consider below ways to tell a child to “be quiet” with a toy because it’s so noisy and the father is trying to talk to the mother:

**Coercive**—(in aggressive tone) “Be quiet or I’ll throw that toy out!”

**Informative**—(in an assertive tone) “I can’t hear your mother when you are that noisy. If you play in this room, you need to play with the toy quietly or choose another toy. Otherwise you will need to go to another room or have the toy removed.”

The child receiving informative instruction is also getting examples of how context affects feelings, thoughts, and actions. In short, he is given enough information to support learning to track.

Informative parenting is “wordy” and demands good communication skills. However, this in itself is an important point. Hart & Risley (1995), in their seminal research, found that the number of words used by parents when interacting with children predicts language and cognitive development. Furthermore, they found that not only was the amount of words predictive but it also appeared that those parents who praised and informed more, as opposed to engaging in discouraging language and negation had children with superior cognitive development.

The results of Hart and Risley (1995) are consistent with the argument put forward by RFT, that language shapes cognition and cognition is a product of linguistic interaction. Coercive practices do not inform nor seek to inform, and as such they fail to maximize the developmental power of the symbolic transmission system. The result is lower levels of language development and lower IQ scores across the lifespan. It appears clear that coercive practices in childhood diminish the person’s ongoing ability to develop increasingly complex repertoires of behavior (i.e., cognitive skills) needed to learn from, adapt to, and interact with the social/symbolic world.

## Intervention

### *Acceptance and Mindfulness Processes*

Looking at family systems and development through the lens of RFT gives us clear insights into how to use language to foster flexible and adaptive development as opposed to simply managing or reducing problem behavior. Using RFT principles, parents can learn how to obtain meaningful outcomes in noncoercive, developmentally appropriate, and self-reinforcing ways. Acceptance and commitment therapy is an RFT-informed approach that may be useful here, as detailed in Coyne, McHugh, and Martinez (2011).

The primary goal of ACT is to help strengthen psychological flexibility so that individuals may pursue goals in meaningful or valued domains, even in the presence of unpleasant or unwanted psychological events (thoughts, feelings, physical sensations). Thus, it targets experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion as pathological processes, and encourages individuals to engage in valued behaviors.

Broadly construed, ACT comprises two domains: acceptance and mindfulness processes, and commitment and behavior change processes. Acceptance and mindfulness components focus on “defusion” (deliteralization) of thoughts, promoting the practice of present moment awareness, and developing an understanding of the self that is stable and inclusive of (but not identical to) transitory psychological events and experiences. These sensibilities—an awareness of the present moment and what it affords, and an awareness that is not dominated or controlled by mental events and their verbal content—is a foundation for accurate tracking. Acceptance and mindfulness components of ACT may be considered a special class of exposure and utilize a collection of therapeutic techniques called *defusion* strategies. The goal of defusion is to assist individuals to experience thoughts about or evaluations of given stimuli as *merely thoughts and evaluations*, rather than actual or real events. In so doing, defusion assists individuals in developing a broader, more flexible behavioral repertoire and more effective “tracking.”

Consider a parent who experiences thoughts like “I am a failure,” or “I can’t stand being with this kid.” This parent might be invited to try a set of defusion exercises in which they could step back from and notice these uncomfortable thoughts as simply thoughts rather than reified truths. This opens up a window of opportunity in which a parent can *choose* a response, rather than engage in somewhat automatic, knee-jerk coercion. For example the parent might simply note the thought and respond to their child in a sensitive manner, or laugh about the thought, or say the thought aloud. Additionally, the parent may engage in more accurate tracking and thus be more aware of a broader range of environmental contingencies rather than focusing solely on those “in their heads.” In that sense, defusion strategies attempt to alter the behavior regulatory or *psychological functions* of uncomfortable thoughts. Through multiple training exemplars, psychological functions of all members of a class may be changed in this manner.

To promote flexibility and development, “tracking” skills could be encouraged by using conventional functional analytic approaches (such as the use of an ABC diary) and then teaching parents to use this analysis to inform their language. For example, consider a child who taunts his brother to get social attention. The coercive parent states, “Don’t do that” or “Do that and I will put you in time-out.” Neither of these responses specifies or

teaches using language. A track would specify context, action, and functional outcome, not just focus on the parent's anger or threat. For example, "If you have nothing to do and make fun of your brother, you will end up getting him upset and I will have to remove you." In this "track," the child has chance to more effectively learn *contingency*. Furthermore, if the parent were to identify how the child could get his needs met and "track" those, then the symbolic system is used to facilitate adaptation and development of skills.

It's important to remember that a track is only as good as the prediction it provides. If the parent tracks in a fashion that is *not* congruent with the context (e.g., the parent does not keep their promise or their predicted outcomes do not transpire) then the child will lose trust for the parent's guidance. Thus, tracking not only allows children to learn from their parents' language, but it makes parents think about and use the context more functionally. In doing so, the child's motivation shifts from being under the parent's aversive control to the various naturally and logically occurring reinforcing and punishing consequences. The outcome of parents' use of "tracking" is that they become credible *and* functional information sources for the child. Parents' tracking of positive and negative outcomes empowers the child to learn that they are part of a context. The parent simply has described that context so the child can benefit from that knowledge. The language system is now functioning as intended, and the child can make informed decisions. Furthermore, *even if the child chooses the path that leads to a negative outcome*, the parent is proven to be a credible source of information as the negative consequence occurs as predicted.

Therapy often turns at this stage to focusing on what the parent defines as "prosocial" behavior. In the process of refining this understanding, parents often reflect on their own behaviors in social and work domains or in their own childhoods. This leads to the parents thinking developmentally as well as functionally. Once the parent has understood the importance of expanding prosocial and coping skills under the umbrella of psychological flexibility, therapy can then turn toward creating functional contexts to allow tracking to work. This involves assisting parents to find natural/logical reinforces and punishers in the home context. By "natural" we mean consequences that would normally be imposed by society at large but are simplified down in the "first society" (i.e., the family). For example, the social consequences for antisocial

behavior in a group often entail exclusion from the group or group activity (e.g., telling rude jokes at a dinner party, and then being asked to leave a restaurant). The consequences for prosocial behavior are increased access and invitations to be in those social groups with all the benefits that brings (e.g., more invitations to parties and outings at nice restaurants).

Often this process identifies that coercive families use few "natural" reinforcers in their contexts. Moreover, coercive parents do not play or socialize a great deal with their children and have little insight into what would be motivating or meaningful for their children. Furthermore, they also have few routines in the house that make prosocial behavior functional (e.g., working as team to get the kitchen clean assists in the family all being able to have free time as a group or as individuals). The result of working through the alternative behavior and naturally occurring functional context with the parents is that they have greater insight into what is motivating and has developmental benefit for their child. In addition, they can now consciously provide a context that promotes the occurrence of these functions so that they may track the context for the child to facilitate prosocial learning.

### ***Commitment and Behavior Change Processes***

Given the persistence of coercive family processes, it is also important to implement the behavior change components of ACT, notably "values" and "committed action." In ACT, *values*, or in technical terms formative and motivative augmentals, may help motivate more consistent engagement in treatment and better persistence in using learned skills. Values place the difficult work of treatment into a meaningful and valued context such that parents may show greater willingness to implement learned skills, be more consistent, and persist in the face of extinction bursts as well as other barriers to change. In values interventions, parents are encouraged through experiential exercises to come into contact with verbally constructed pursuits that function as powerful reinforcement. For example, through these exercises, parents may become aware of values of "being a loving parent," or "having a good relationship with one's children." In this way, parents may work toward learning and appropriately performing a skill set of adaptive behavior management strategies including tracking and limit setting, for example, in the larger context of more meaningful

or valued (and reinforcing) ideas, beliefs, or constructs that serve as powerful regulators of parenting behaviors.

Consider the example of planned ignoring. Parents who remain focused on the valued pursuit of, say, “helping my child become a respectful person,” are more likely to persist in ignoring rather than acquiesce to their child’s temper tantrum. Moreover, contacting parenting values may also assist in the generalization of skills beyond the clinic, as in the case presented by Coyne & Wilson (2004). The mother of a 6-year-old oppositional child who had been expelled from school due to physical violence and verbal threats to kill peers participated in an in vivo parent-training approach (Eyberg & Robinson, 1982) augmented with ACT. The mother was asked to consider the following: “In a world where it is possible for you to choose what sort of life your son would have, what would that look like?” This led her to imagine his academic success, having loving relationships with others, and getting a good job. Once she had contacted these images, the therapist encouraged her to bring them to mind when she felt that it was difficult to set consistent limits and to advocate for her son’s return to school. This supported consistent treatment engagement and use of the parenting skills she had learned, as well as the side effect of increasing her sense of parenting efficacy (Coyne & Wilson, 2004). Allowing parents to work for verbally constructed rewards is another way in which derived relational responding extends traditional respondent and operant conceptualizations of behavior change.

### Summary

Coercive parent–child interaction is arguably one of the best-documented areas of contextual behavioral research in the behavioral science literature. Traditional behavioral accounts have led to targeted interventions that have robust effects on parenting behavior and child outcomes. However, coercive interpersonal processes in families are incredibly resistant to change, and when gains are made, they are sometimes very difficult for families to maintain. In this chapter, we have made the case that an RFT conceptualization of coercive family process adds precision and scope to operant and classical conditioning accounts. Addressing the verbal or symbolic processes of parents is essential to a nuanced understanding of the relative value of reinforces and punishers in the family context. It also adds a powerful strategy to augment extant treatment approaches.

An RFT account allows us to harness the speed and power of RGB and its influence on parent–child interaction and its contribution to the persistence of maladaptive parenting and coercive interaction cycles. Finally, employing a contextual-behavioral approach to intervention, as in ACT, can help parents defuse from verbal content and support the development of pivotal parenting skills such as “tracking.” Furthermore, utilizing augmentals such as values facilitates parents’ active participation in treatment and their continued use of newly learned skills. These tactics may motivate more sensitive and responsive parenting across more varied settings and situations that set the stage for developmental processes that advance the child’s psychological capacities and increase the likelihood of reinforcement of future prosocial exchanges.

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