

# Chapter 22

## Rational Emotive Parent Education



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### Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents an approach to parent education based on the Cognitive-Behavioral and Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) approach. The chapter addresses the following questions:

- How did REBT contribute to the parent education field?
- What is the focus of REBT-based parent education?
- How well does REBT parent education work, for whom and how?
- What are the recent developments in the field and how are they connected with the trends in the parenting education field?

### Parenting

Parenting refers to the process of child-rearing and includes all the endeavors that parents make to socialize their children (e.g., emotions, cognitions, behaviors, values). Effective parenting (i.e., positive parenting; Eisenberg et al., 2005) is characterized by high levels of warmth, involvement, positive discipline, and consistent practices. Dysfunctional or sub-optimal parenting refers to characteristics such as lack of warmth, hostility, negativity, conflict, and harsh discipline or neglect.

Parenting and parent–child relationship are considered to contribute in essential ways to child mental health (see Ryan, O’Farrelly, & Ramchandani, 2017 for a

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review). It has been found that inconsistent, harsh, or insensitive parenting contribute to the development of externalizing or internalizing disorders in children (e.g., Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Causal connections have been found in longitudinal studies between ineffective or suboptimal parenting and children's emotional and social development, physical health, and academic attainment (e.g., Waylen, Stallard, & Stewart-Brown, 2008).

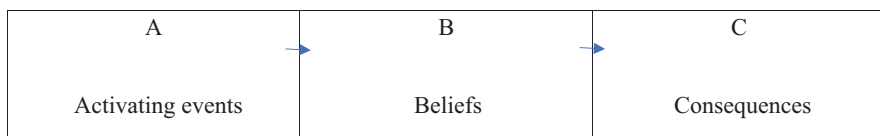
Given the fact that many of the parents report using dysfunctional practices such as hostility, resentment, and hitting or shouting and that the origins of many mental health problems lie in childhood, it becomes essential that parents receive support in improving their skills. Indeed, parent education programs have been developed based on the premise that parenting can be improved. Parent education refers to preventative and systematic programs aimed at teaching parents effective parenting skills as a means for promoting better child adjustment and preventing child psychopathology (Fine, 1980).

Parent education has many variations in terms of characteristics (Britto, Ponguta, Reyes, & Karnati, 2015), including their approach (attachment based, systemic, behavioral, or cognitive-behavioral), format (e.g., group, individual, self-administered, media) or settings where they are delivered (e.g., community, clinic, home-based or combination), etc.

Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a form of Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) that conceptualizes the quality of parenting and parent education with a focus on irrational and rational cognitions as essential determinants of parent emotions and behaviors. Thus, REBT parent education aims to teach parents rational parenting beliefs and differentiates itself from other CBT parent education programs (e.g., Incredible Years curricula) based on its primary focus on helping parents first address their emotional problems associated with parenting difficulties.

### ***The REBT Theory of Parenting***

REBT was founded by Albert Ellis in 1955, which was originally named Rational Therapy and later changed to Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (Ellis, 1994). The main assumptions of REBT are that emotional suffering is determined largely by irrational (rigid, extreme) beliefs and that humans need to use scientific methods to test their thinking and consequently their irrational beliefs into rational ones. The ABC model synthesizes these assumptions and is the cornerstone of the REBT, and thus to its parent education application.



In his theory, (Ellis 1962, 1991, 2003; Ellis & Bernard 2006) conceptualized irrational beliefs as rigid beliefs that are inconsistent with reality, illogical, and unhelpful in reaching long-term goals. Thus, in this model, parental reactions to child noncompliance (the C; e.g., anger and yelling) is caused not by child’s misbehavior (the A) but by his or her irrational beliefs about it (the Bs; e.g., “Children must be obedient”).

Bernard and Joyce (1984) described the main irrational beliefs that are causing parents to experience dysfunctional negative emotions, such as anger, depression, anxiety, or guilt. These emotions are called dysfunctional since they are interfering with the use of effective parenting strategies. The main form of irrational beliefs is demandingness (DEM) which refers to absolutistic should of the person regarding self, others, and life. Awfulizing (AWF) refers to exaggerated negative evaluations of circumstances, self or others. Frustration intolerance (FI) refers to believing that things that are frustrating cannot be tolerated. Global evaluation (GE) refers to individuals evaluating their worth based on specific attributes or behaviors. Rational beliefs in turn refer to flexible beliefs that are consistent with the empirical reality are logical and helpful in terms of supporting the people in reaching their long-term goals. The rational alternative to DEM is preferences (PRE) which refer to acknowledge that own wishes and making efforts to reach them but not demanding that they happen. Badness (BAD) is the rational alternative to AWF that acknowledged the badness of negative events but does not exaggerate to make them a catastrophe. Frustration tolerance (FT) is the rational alternative to FI that refers to the belief that one can stand the frustration faced. Unconditional acceptance of self, others, and life is the rational alternative to GE that refers to give up global evaluations based on arbitrary criteria and evaluate only behaviors as good or bad.

In Table 22.1 shows how various types of irrational beliefs are related to specific emotions and how their corresponding rational beliefs are related to functional negative emotions.

**Table 22.1** Illustration of the connection between IBs, emotions, and parenting when confronted with negative As

Dysfunctional parenting		Rational parenting	
Irrational beliefs	Dysfunctional negative emotions	Rational beliefs	Functional negative emotions
“I cannot stand being disobeyed”	Anger	“I do not like being disobeyed but I can stand it”	Annoyance
“I am a bad parent”	Guilt	“I have made faults with my children”	Remorse
“It is awful not to be respected”	Anxiety	“It is bad not to be respected but is not awful”	Concern
“I am worthless since I have failed as a parent”	Depression	“I have made mistakes but this does not reflect on my value”	Sadness

## *How REBT Conceptualizes Parenting Styles*

Ellis has described in his book *How to Raise an Emotionally Healthy, Happy Child* (Ellis, Wolfe, & Moseley, 1966) how irrational beliefs determine dysfunctional parenting and how irrational beliefs are transmitted to children. In Hauck (1967), has proposed in his book called *The Rational Management of Children* the concept of rational parenting that stayed as foundational for the REBT-based parent education field. He identified four styles of parenting and their underlying cognitive mechanisms, namely the unkind and not firm style, the unkind and firm style, the kind and not firm style, and the kind and firm style.

The unkind and not firm parenting style is a neglectful and irrational parenting style since it lacks both affectionate or positive interactions and consistent limit setting. Parents using this style are uninvolved and do not use behavioral control strategies. Children of parents that use this parenting style are at great risk for antisocial and defiant behavior.

The unkind and firm style is a dysfunctional parenting style characterized by low levels of warmth and high demands from the parent. Parents using this style are setting excessively strict rules and are focused mainly on the faults of their children. Irrational beliefs that determine the use of unkind and firm parenting style are related to the control domain: DEM: "Children need to obey authority", "I must be in charge", FI: "I cannot stand to be disobeyed", GE: "Not being obeyed means that I am a failure", AWF: "It is awful not to be obeyed". Children of parents that use this style have often approval DEM and are anxious and submissive.

The kind and not firm parenting style is a dysfunctional parenting style characterized by high levels of warmth and low demands from the parent, corresponding to the permissive parenting style of Baumrind (1967). Parents using this style are warm to their children but pose little demands on children, and when setting limits are inconsistent in following them through. Irrational beliefs that determine parents to use the kind and not firm parenting style are related to approval demands based on the following processes: DEM: "I must be approved by my children", FI: "I cannot stand to see my children complain", GE: "I am a bad parent if I frustrate my children", AWF: "It is awful to frustrate my child". Children of parents that use the kind and not firm parenting style have FI to rules or hard working and low responsibility.

The kind and firm style is the rational parenting style characterized by high levels of warmth and high levels of demands from the parent. Parents using this style are involved in positive interactions with their children and are able to set and maintain firm rules. The kind and firm parenting style is supported by parents' rational beliefs such as unconditional self and child acceptance.

In a study that we conducted (Gavita, David, & DiGiuseppe, 2014), we documented that global evaluation in the form of self-downing (e.g., "I am a bad parent") is a proximal determinant of parent anger.

The essential role that unconditional acceptance plays in rational parenting was emphasized by Ellis (Ellis et al., 1966) and is discussed in detail in the chapter *Self-acceptance and raising children* (David & DiGiuseppe, 2016). According to

Ellis, one of the most valuable things that parents can teach children is not to rate people by their actions, possessions, status, or traits in terms of their self-worth. For example, parents can learn in REBT parent education self-acceptance and then teach it by explaining to the child that she/he can dislike another person's traits but needs to avoid judging the whole of the person as bad. It is important that the parent internalizes unconditional acceptance to be able to model it and verbalize it to their children in critical events.

### ***Parent Education Programs***

REBT parent education is a preventative program focused primarily on equipping parents with skills to manage their parental distress and, in a second step, to adopt rational parenting. Thus, the main mechanism for change is targeting parental cognitions based on the ABC model and learning the rational parenting style. The priority that REBT parent education gives in intervention to the emotional difficulties of the parents is based on research supporting significant differences in the outcomes for such an initial focus (see Gavita & Joyce for a review; see also Gavita, David, & Joyce, 2011).

There are a series of sequences in the REBT parent education and which reflect the ABC model of REBT (Joyce, 1995, 2006):

1. Assessment of the initial level of parent and child functioning, considering relevant variables, such as child mental health, parenting style, parent beliefs, parent emotions. Specific tools were developed for the assessment of these variables, such as the Parent Anger Scale (Gavita, DiGiuseppe, David, & DelVecchio, 2011; see Appendix 1), or the Parent Rational and Irrational Beliefs Scale (Gavita et al., 2011; see Appendix 2). The same assessment is implemented at the end of the parent intervention and ideally at follow-up.
2. Teaching parents the ABCs of managing their emotional distress;
3. Familiarizing parents with rational beliefs and reinforcing their practice;
4. Teaching parents the rational parenting style and effective parenting practices;
5. Teaching parents on how to use rational-emotive methods for dealing with children's emotional problems.

There are a few REBT parent education programs that were developed and tested, and in the next section, their contents, structure, and evidence base will be described.

### **Rational Parent Education**

Rational Parent Education was the first curricula that was developed by Marie Joyce (1995) based on initial efforts to adapt REBT to parenting (e.g., Berger, 1983). The structure of this curricula reflect the stages presented above and is segmented in four

sections: (1) Psychoeducation on the ABC model and assessment of emotional distress; (2) Introducing the kind and firm parenting style and reinforcing rational thinking; (3) Rational problems solving about children's emotional and behavioral difficulties; and (4) Educating rational thinking in children.

Efficacy of the Rational Parent Education was tested (Joyce, 1995) in a quasi-experimental study that included 48 parents. Parents were distributed in the Rational Parent Education condition or the control wait-list condition. Significant improvements were obtained in the Rational Parent Education group for parent irrational beliefs, anger, and guilt after the program compared to the control group. Moreover, measures at 10-month follow-up showed improvements in child behavior problems and GE.

## **SOS Help for Parents**

SOS Help for Parents is a REBT self-help parenting education curricula developed by Lynn Clark (1996a, 1996b). The program consists of child management skills assessment, video education and vignettes, self-help books, forms and handouts. The program dedicates one of the self-help books to helping parents deal with emotional difficulties and the second to helping parents deal with child behavioral difficulties, each of them being accompanied by video contents. Resources are either for counseling and mental health professionals or for parents.

The program builds around three basic child-rearing rules and four major child-rearing errors to be avoided by parents which are explained in both the video and the self-help books. The three child-rearing rules reinforced by the program are: (1) Reward good behavior; (2) Do not reward bad behavior; and (3) Correct bad behavior. Parent positive disciplining strategies are built around the rules and consist of effective use of rewards, effective instructions, consequences, ignoring, and time-out. The four major child-rearing errors to be avoided by parents are: (1) failure to reward good behavior; (2) Accidentally rewarding of bad behavior; (3) Accidentally punishing good behavior; and (4) Failing to correct bad behavior when mild corrections are needed.

The SOS Help for Parents curricula was tested in two separate studies. One of the studies (Khowaja et al., 2016) was a pilot investigation of the program in a brief 6-week format. Fifty-seven mothers of preschool children from Pakistan participated in this study and were distributed to the parent education group or control group which consisted of information about child care. Results showed significant improvements in parenting in the parenting education group compared to the control group, in terms of laxness and over-reactivity. Another study (Gavita et al., 2011) has investigated this program in a 10 sessions format in preventing externalizing disorders in school-aged children. Positive results were found for parents' distress, parenting, and externalizing symptoms in children.

## Rational Positive Parenting Program

The Rational Positive Parenting Program (rPPP) was developed by Oana David (David & DiGiuseppe, 2016; Gavita, 2011) and builds upon the aforementioned sequences and parent education programs, which are integrated in a comprehensive format and complimented with innovative components, such as “psychological pills”/rational statements or rational cartoons (see [www.retman.ro](http://www.retman.ro)) to generalize rational thinking and coach it for children. Structure and contents of the full format rPPP are presented in Table 22.2.

The rPPP can be delivered in three formats: full-length, short version, and an online format. The full-length (10 weekly sessions) and short versions (4 sessions) of rPPP are held using a group format. The program is using experiential strategies, handouts, video vignettes, and monitoring forms (see Appendix 3).

The rPPP is most well documented REBT parent education, its efficacy being tested in many rigorous trials, in all its formats. The full-length 10 sessions rPPP was tested in both the prevention and treatment of child externalizing symptoms in 130 preschool and school-aged children. It was compared to a cognitive-behavioral standard education program and results showed that both improved parenting, but rPPP brought more generalized improvements for child externalizing symptoms and longer term outcomes (David, David, & Dobrea, 2014). Moreover, the mechanism of change in the rPPP was found to be parental distress and parenting (David, 2014), which supports the REBT theory.

The efficacy of the short version of the rPPP was tested when working with placement parents. Ninety-seven foster parents were included in the study, which were distributed in the rPPP or a wait-list. Results showed that the parent education was effective in improving parent distress and child behavior problems. In another trial (Gavita & Calin, 2013), the self-help rPPP was found effective in the prevention of both externalizing and internalizing symptoms in children.

**Table 22.2** Structure of the rPPP program

Sessions 1–3	Assessment and psycho-education on the ABC model. managing parental distress. Consolidating parent rational beliefs and introducing the rational parenting style.
Sessions 4–5	Positive relationship with the child as foundation skill. using rewards-based tools and effective limit-setting.
Sessions 6–7	Strategies for managing noncompliant behavior (e.g., time-out).
Sessions 7–10	Effective communication and problem-solving skills. Assessment, maintenance of gains, and termination issues.

## Advances in REBT Parent Education

A major current focus in psychotherapeutic and prevention sciences is increasing accessibility to interventions, targeting relevant risk factors, and increasing their efficacy based on a precision medicine approach. In this vein, REBT parent education programs were adapted to be implemented online.

The rPPP was extended with an online version based on eight sessions that makes use of interactive exercises, videos, and forms. Innovative components are based on the emotion regulation framework and momentary ecological assessment by integrating it with the mobile PsyPills app (David & David, 2019). The PsyPills app allows parents to access personalized “psychological pills” when in distress and receive personalized rational thinking strategies that were found effective. Another innovative tool incorporated is gaming and implicit attention bias modification for parents. The game is aimed at training parents’ attention towards positive faces and can be used in the beginning of the parent education by the parents that have difficulties disengaging from negative patterns of interactions.

Contents of the online rPPP are the following: Module 1—I want to be a rational positive parent!; Module 2—Rational parenting: managing stress; Module 3—Rational parenting: unconditional parenting; Module 4—Positive parenting and rewards; Module 5—Limit setting; Module 6—Managing child behaviors; Module 7—Effective communication and praise; Module 8—Problem solving. Efficacy of the online rPPP was recently tested in a trial and its efficacy was documented for parenting and improving parent–child positive interactions (David, Capris, & Jarda, 2017). Building on the contents of the online rPPP, the mobile app *Rational Parenting Coach – RETHink parenting!* was recently developed (David, 2019) and it capitalizes on the CB-REB phases of intervention, but also personalizes the parent education based on an initial assessment of parenting styles, parent distress, and child difficulties (see Fig. 22.1). Moreover, the app offers the possibility to use strategies when needed, based on an ecological momentary assessment and monitoring.

Another online parent education program that can be accessed online is YCDI! Positive Parent Program (<https://www.youcandoiteducation.com.au/parents/>) which is part of the You Can Do It! Education program developed by Michael Bernard and Patricia Bernard. YCDI Parents focuses on three main areas: Positive Parents (e.g., being a positive role model, managing stress), Effective Parents (e.g., effective discipline and relationship skills), and Positive Children (e.g., developing children’s resilience and positive character). The program uses an e-learning format where the parent receives information related to the topic of each module.





Fig. 22.1 The Rational Parenting Coach mobile app

## Conclusions

REBT Parent education has brought important contributions to the more general parent education field and at the same time has meaningfully extended the applications of RE-CBT. Comprehensive curriculums have been developed which have been documented in rigorous studies and found effective in the prevention of child psychopathology. REBT parent education is unique not only for its focus but also given the integration of recent advancements in clinical cognitive sciences and technologies.

## “Test Yourself” Questions

1. While all parenting education programs focus on assisting parents in improving parenting skills, what is the primary focus of REBT-based parent education?
2. REBT parent education focuses on teaching parents rational parenting. What cognitions are determining parents to adopt a kind and not firm parenting style?
3. There are a few REBT parent education programs that were developed. Which are the four phases of intervention that are common to all?

## Appendix 1

### *Parent Anger Scale*

*Instructions:* At one time or another, most parents feel angry. For each of the following items, circle the response that best describes you.

1	2	3	4	5	6	
Less than once a month	About once a month	About once a week	Several days a week	Every day	Several times a day	
1. Even though I hold it in and do not show it, I get angry with my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I get angry and break or throw away some of my child's things.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I get angry and cannot stop thinking about the way my child behaved.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I get angry and have a problem controlling my behavior toward my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. I get angry with my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I get angry with my child and feel like throwing things, slamming doors, or banging the table.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I get angry with my child and I feel like spanking or hitting my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I get angry with my child and I spank, slap, or hit my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. I get angry with my child and throw things, slam doors, or bang the table.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I get so angry with my child that I cannot control my behavior.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I get so angry with my child that I do not do things that I know my child wants me to do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. I get so angry with my child that I feel my blood boil.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I get so angry with my child that I feel my muscles get tight.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I get so angry with my child that I grab or push my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I get so angry with my child that I just want to make the tension go away.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. I get so angry with my child that I say mean things, use bad language, curse, or insult my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I get so angry with my child that I scream or yell at my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I lose control of my anger with my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. I resent the time and energy I put into parenting.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I think my anger with my child is justified because of the way my child behaves.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. I think that I have a harder job being a parent than other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I think that my child deserves to be punished for misbehaving.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. I use my anger to get my child to behave.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. When I feel angry with my child, I boil inside, don't show it, and keep things inside of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. When I get angry with my child, I feel like saying mean things to my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. When I get angry with my child, I feel like screaming or yelling at my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. When I get angry with my child, I tell relatives and friends so they will know how bad my child has behaved.	1	2	3	4	5	6

28. I lose my temper with my child about:
1. almost nothing.
  2. only one thing.
  3. two or three things.
  4. several things.
  5. many things.
  6. almost everything.
29. When I get angry with my child, I stay angry for:
1. only a few minutes.
  2. less than 1 hour.
  3. about 1–2 hours.
  4. several hours.
  5. about 1–2 days.
  6. several days.
30. On average how angry do you get at your child?
1. Not at all angry.
  2. Somewhat angry.
  3. Mildly angry.
  4. Moderately angry.
  5. Very angry.
  6. Extremely angry.

## Appendix 2

### *Parent Rational and Irrational Beliefs Scale (P-RIBS)*

Name:

Today's Date:    /    /   

Age:    Sex: Male or Female (circle one)

Date of Birth:    /    /   

*General instructions:* This scale has two parts. Please follow the specific instructions as follows.

## Part 1

*Instructions:* Please think about a situation when your child(ren) disobey or disrespect you. Try to recall the thoughts that you have had in such situations. When faced with adverse situations, some parents tend to think that situation absolutely must be the way they want (in terms of *absolute must*). In the same situation, other people think in *preferential terms* and *accept* the situation, even if they want very much that those situations do not happen. In light of these possibilities, please estimate how much the statements below represent the thoughts that you have in such situations.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. My child absolutely must respect and obey me.	1	2	3	4	5
2. If my child disobeys me, it doesn't mean that I am a worthless person.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think it is awful to be disobeyed by my own child.	1	2	3	4	5
4. If my child disobey me, it means that I am worthless.	1	2	3	4	5
5. It is unbearable to be disobeyed by my own child.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am always optimistic about my future.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I can stand when my child disobeys me, although it is difficult for me to tolerate it.	1	2	3	4	5
8. It is important for me to keep busy.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I really do not want my child to disobey me, but I realize and accept that things do not have to always be the way I want them to be.	1	2	3	4	5
10. It is unpleasant and unfortunate to be disobeyed by my own child, but it is not terrible.	1	2	3	4	5
11. When my child disobeys me, I think that they are bad, worthless, or condemnable.	1	2	3	4	5
12. When my child disobeys me, I accept them as being worthwhile despite her/his poor behavior.	1	2	3	4	5

**Part 2**

*Instructions:* Please think about a situation when your child(ren) disobey or disrespect you. Try to recall the thoughts that you have had in such situations. When faced with adverse situations, some parents tend to think that situation absolutely must be the way they want (in terms of *absolute must*). In the same situation, other people think in *preferential terms* and *accept* the situation, even if they want very much that those situations do not happen. In light of these possibilities, please estimate how much the statements below represent the thoughts that you have in such situations.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
13. I absolutely must be a good parent.	1	2	3	4	5
14. If I am not a good parent, it doesn't mean that I am a worthless person.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I think it is awful to be a bad parent.	1	2	3	4	5
16. If I am not a good parent, it means that I am worthless.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It is unbearable to think of myself as a bad parent.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I am always optimistic about my future.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I can stand to be a bad parent.	1	2	3	4	5
20. It is important for me to keep busy.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I really do want to be a good parent, but I realize and accept that I may not always be as good at parenting as I want to be.	1	2	3	4	5
22. It is unpleasant and unfortunate to be a bad parent, but it is not terrible.	1	2	3	4	5
23. When my child disobeys me, I think that my child is bad, worthless, or condemnable.	1	2	3	4	5
24. When my child disobeys me, I accept him/her as being worthwhile.	1	2	3	4	5

### Appendix 3

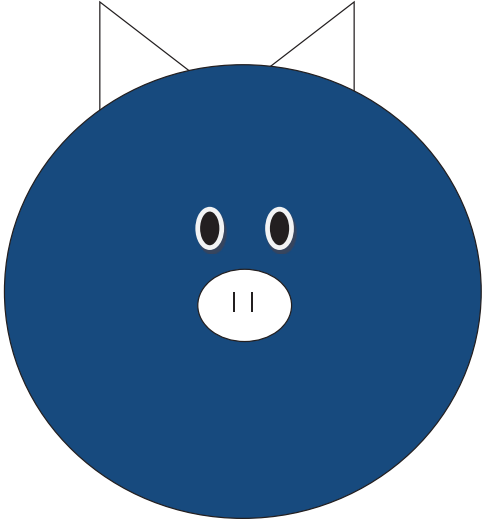
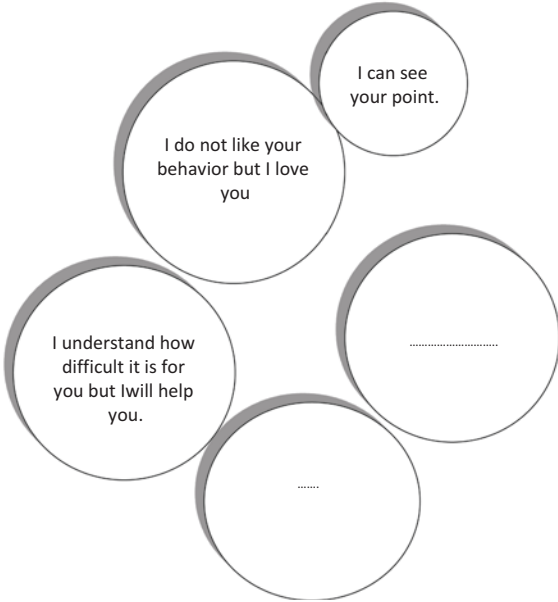


#### The ABC worksheet

A Activating event What happened?	B Beliefs	C Consequences How did you react? (emotional, physiological, behavioral) How intense? 1-10
E.g., My child misbehaved.	He should obey to my requests.	Anger, 7 Harsh punishment



Bank account of unconditional accepting and validating statements  
(child and partner)



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