

Assessing the Behavior-Chain in Parent-Child Conflict

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A behavior-chain is a descriptive assessment procedure derived from Applied Behavioral Analysis that involves a systematic approach to acquiring information about a behavior. In a behavior-chain sequence surrounding an incident of parent-child conflict, the behavior-chain represents the sequence of interactions and behaviors that led up to a conflict (i.e, the *antecedent* cues triggering the conflict), how the conflict was managed or escalated (the conflict *behavior* itself), and the aftermath and resolution of the conflict (the *consequences* of the conflict). In Applied Behavioral Analysis, the behavior-chain is represented by the sequence A-B-C; antecedent-behavior-consequence.

Conflict occurs in the context of two people. As a result, there will be two perspectives on the origins, nature, and resolution of the conflict. Obtaining complete information regarding these multiple perspectives is imperative to the accurate clinical assessment and diagnosis surrounding the parent-child conflict, which can then lead to the development of an effective treatment plan. Obtaining information from only one perspective in the conflict introduces bias into the assessment of the conflict, which will then bias the diagnosis of the causal factors creating the parent-child conflict, which will lead to an ineffective treatment plan for resolving the conflict. In order to develop an effective treatment plan, the assessment of the conflict must yield an accurate diagnosis regarding the cause and escalation of the conflict. In order to be accurate, the assessment and diagnosis must be based on balanced and unbiased information from the perspectives of all participants.

During clinical interviews, the participants often describe events using global terms, such as the parent felt “upset” by the child’s behavior, or that the child was “defiant” or “argumentative” with the parent. While these global descriptions capture the overall tenor of the conflict from the perspective of the person reporting on the conflict, these global descriptors prevent an objective understanding for what occurred, how the conflict began and how it progressed. Clinical interviewing regarding parent-child conflict benefits significantly from describing the specific behaviors involved in each phase of the conflict; this is called the specific behavior-chain sequence of events surrounding a specific conflict incident.

Eliciting a specific behavior-chain sequence from each participant in the conflict allows the assessor to then take the specific behavior-chain information obtained from one participant back to the other participant for confirmation or disconfirmation of the information in the behavior-chain sequence. During this confirmation/disconfirmation of the behavior-chain sequence, the perspective of each participant surrounding the conflict is elicited and discrepancies in their perspectives become evident. Self-serving distortions by the participants to their reporting and characterizations of events also become evident during the description of the specific behavior-chain sequence. The detailed description of the behavior-chain sequence allows the clinical assessor to make an independent judgement regarding the factors that led to, and may have escalated, the conflict, which leads directly to the identification of intervention strategies.

Discussing the behavior-chain sequence regarding a specific incident of conflict during a conjoint parent-child session can provide an additional level of analysis surrounding the parent-child conflict by allowing an examination of the veracity of the participant's earlier characterizations of the conflict when they are now directly in the presence of the other participant. Examining the behavior-chain sequence of conflict in a conjoint parent-child session also provides an assessment of the participants' ability to develop a consensually agreed upon reality in describing the events surrounding their conflict. In creating a joint description of the behavior-chain sequence surrounding their conflict, the differing perspectives of the participants also become clearly evident.

Collecting Behavior-Chain Information

Collecting the behavior-chain description of a conflict begins with gathering specific information about events occurring just prior to the start of the conflict. The parent or child is asked to describe what he or she was specifically doing just prior to the start of the conflict event and is then led into a step-by-step description of the conflict itself. The key in a behavior-chain sequence is to obtain *specific* reporting on *specific* behaviors and feelings. Any global term used by the parent or child should be inquired about to elicit a more specific description of the behavior or feeling.

A behavior-chain interview continues into the conflict itself by collecting information about the specific sequence of behaviors that followed the start of the conflict. The behavior-chain collects information on each specific behavior or communication that led to the next behavior or communication ("And then what happened? And then what did you say?"). The behavior-chain sequence ends with collecting specific information about how the conflict was resolved, or not resolved.

During the collection of the behavior-chain sequence, the clinical assessor can offer clinically guided inquiries into the participant's account of events to examine the participant's response to these clinical intervention probes. For example, the clinical assessor might ask a question challenging why the participant responded in the way that he or she did, or the clinical assessor might adopt the perspective of the other participant for a moment to examine whether the participant providing the current description is capable of de-centering sufficiently to adopt the perspective of another person. The purpose of these clinical probes during the collection of behavior-chain sequences is both to expand the quality of the information collected and to explore the underlying organizing schemas of the participants by offering minor challenges to the perspective of the participants. These minor challenging probes designed to elicit information about underlying organizing schema patterns are called "response-to-intervention" probes in the clinical interview process.

Behavior-Chain Assessment Interview Examples

1: Targeted Parent Interview

The following example of an interview with a targeted parent (mother) offers an example of a clinical interview designed to elicit a behavior-chain sequence surrounding a specific incident of parent-child conflict.

Antecedent Phase

Line 1 - **Assessor:** So what were you doing just before the conflict happened?

Line 2 - **Targeted Parent:** I was getting ready to go to the store to buy some food for dinner.

L3 - **Assessor:** So what were you doing, specifically?

L4 - **TP:** I think I was putting some clothes in the laundry to start washing while we were at the store... yeah, and then I was looking for my purse and keys.

L5 - **Assessor:** And what happened next?

L6 - **TP:** I said to Michael [the 12-year-old child], that he needed to get in the car so we could go to the store.

L7 - **Assessor:** Did Michael know you were planning to go to the store, did he have any warning about this? Or was this the first he heard about it?

L8 - **TP:** I had told him when I picked him up from school that he needed to get his homework done when we got home, and that we then needed to go to the store to get some food for dinner. So I had told him about it.

L9 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you said, "Michael it's time to get in the car to go to the store" and what happened next?

Conflict Phase

L10 - **TP:** Michael started to argue with me.

L11 - **Assessor:** So you said, "Michael, it's time to get in the car" and what does he say in response?

L12 - **TP:** He says he doesn't want to go to the store.

L13 - **Assessor:** So you say, "Michael, it's time to get in the car?" did you say, "to go to the store," did he know that's why you were asking him to get in the car?

L14 - **TP:** Yes, he knew we were going to the store.

L15 - **Assessor:** So you say, "Michael, it's time to get in the car?" and he says, "No, mom. I don't want to go to the store." Is that what happened?

L16 - **TP:** Yes.

L17 - **Assessor:** And then what happened?

L18 - **TP:** I told him he had to get in the car so we could go to the store.

- L19 - **Assessor:** Did you ask him why he didn't want to go to the store? Did he say why he didn't want to go to the store?
- L20 - **TP:** He said he wanted fast food takeout for dinner.
- L21 - **Assessor:** So did he say, "No, mom. I don't want to go to the store. I want fast food takeout for dinner," or did that come out later?
- L22 - **TP:** That came out later. I said, "Michael it's time to get in the car" and he said he didn't want to, and I insisted he get in the car because we had to get food for dinner, and he said he wanted to get dinner from a fast food takeout place because he hated my cooking.
- L23 - **Assessor:** So you say, "Michael it's time to get in the car," he says no, you insist because you have to get food for dinner and he says he doesn't want you to cook dinner because he hates your cooking and he wants to get fast food takeout for dinner, is that what happened?
- L24 - **TP:** Yes.
- L25 - **Assessor:** Did he say he "hates" your cooking? Did he use the word hate, that he "hates" your cooking? Or did he just say he wanted fast food takeout instead?
- L26 - **TP:** No, he said he hated my cooking and he wanted to get fast food takeout.
- L27 - **Assessor:** Okay, so he says, "No, mom, I don't want to go to the store, I hate your cooking and I want fast food takeout for dinner" – did he say why he hates your cooking? That he didn't like the particular food you planned to prepare that night, or is it that he hates how you prepare everything, that it's your cooking generally that he hates and he wouldn't want anything you cooked?
- L28 - **TP:** No, he didn't say it was what I was cooking that night. It was just general, that he hates my cooking.
- L29 - **Assessor:** Okay, and then what happened?
- L30 - **TP:** I told him that we weren't having fast food takeout that night, that I was going to cook dinner at home, and that he had to get in the car so we could get food for dinner.
- L31 - **Assessor:** What was your tone of voice like? Were you getting angry and frustrated by this point? Or were you still calm?
- L32 - **TP:** I was still calm, I wasn't angry, but I was firm in my tone of voice. He needed to get in the car so we could go to the store.
- L33 - **Assessor:** Okay, and then how did he respond?
- L34 - **TP:** He said, "No, I don't want to go to the store. I'm not going. I want fast food takeout. I hate your cooking. Your cooking tastes like garbage."
- L35 - **Assessor:** Does your cooking taste like garbage? Are you a bad cook?
- L36 - **TP:** No. I'm a good cook.
- L37 - **Assessor:** What were you planning to cook that night, do you remember?

- L38 - **TP:** I didn't know, I was going to talk with him about it. Maybe get some hamburger meat or some chicken, some vegetables, maybe a baked potato. We'd see once we got to the store.
- L39 - **Assessor:** So you were just going to cook up some basic stuff, nothing fancy, and you were going to decide on what to cook when you got to the store, based sort of on what he wanted?
- L40 - **TP:** Yes.
- L41 - **Assessor:** Did he know that was your plan?
- L42 - **TP:** No, I don't think so. We hadn't discussed it. We didn't have a chance. He just started arguing right away.
- L43 - **Assessor:** Okay, so he says he wants fast food takeout because your cooking tastes like garbage – and you're planning to just cook some basic stuff like chicken or hamburgers – and did he say "garbage," did he use the words "your cooking tastes like garbage"?
- L44 - **TP:** Yes.
- L45 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what did you say?
- L46 - **TP:** I was starting to get frustrated at this point, and I told him he didn't have a choice, that we were not going to get fast food takeout, that I was cooking dinner at home, and he had to get in the car now so we could go to the store and buy some food for dinner.
- L47 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what happened next?
- L48 - **TP:** He said no, he said he wasn't going, and he started calling me all sorts of names. He said it always had to be my way, that I never listened to what he wanted, and that he wasn't going to the store. That he hated my cooking, that he hated it over here and that he liked it better at his dad's house.
- L49 - **Assessor:** You said he started calling you names, what sort of names did he call you?
- L50 - **TP:** He said I was a selfish, he said I was a "stupid bitch," and that I only think of myself and what I wanted, that I didn't care about him or what he wanted, things like that.
- L51 - **Assessor:** Okay, and how did you respond, what did you do?
- L52 - **TP:** I was getting angry. I said that's not true - that I don't care what he thinks or wants - but I told him that we weren't having fast food takeout for dinner, and that if he didn't get in the car so we could go to the store to buy some food that he'd just have to eat whatever we had around the house, which wasn't much, breakfast cereal, some apples, cans of soup, things like that.
- L53 - **Assessor:** So why didn't you just say okay, we'll have fast food takeout for dinner. Why did you insist on cooking at home?

- L54 - **TP:** Because I don't think it's good to eat fast food takeout all the time. It's more expensive than eating at home and I'm on a tight budget, and it's not healthy. It's healthier to eat home cooked meals than the food you get at these fast food places.
- L55 - **Assessor:** So it was sort of a matter of principle, that you're on a budget and you want to eat healthier, so you don't want to go to a fast food place? Were you able to explain this to him?
- L56 - **TP:** No, we wouldn't listen. It had to be his way, he wanted fast food takeout and he wouldn't listen to any reasons for not getting fast food.
- L57 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you said that if you didn't go to the store he'd have to eat whatever was around the house for dinner, like a bowl of breakfast cereal for dinner, did you have any bread?
- L58 - **TP:** Yes, there was bread.
- L59 - **Assessor:** Peanut butter, lunch meat, anything like that?
- L60 - **TP:** Yeah, there was peanut butter.
- L61 - **Assessor:** So he could make himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner, an apple, maybe some soup, something like that?
- L62 - **TP:** Yeah.
- L63 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what did he do, how did he respond to this?
- L64 - **TP:** He got really angry, he started calling me a "f***ing bitch," saying that he hates it over here. That he wants to go live with his dad, and he stormed off to his room.

Resolution Phase

- L65 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what did you do then? He storms off to his room angry, how did you respond?
- L66 - **TP:** I told him he couldn't use language like that, but I just let him go. What could I do? He was so angry, I was angry and frustrated. I just wanted him to get in the car so we could go to the store and buy some food for dinner, and we're in this big fight with him calling me names and so angry. I just didn't know what to do.
- L67 - **Assessor:** So he goes off to his room. What did you do?
- L68 - **TP:** I put my purse down and tried to collect myself and figure out what happened. I started to think about what we had around the house for dinner. Maybe I could make some grilled cheese sandwiches and soup, something like that.
- L69 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what happened next.
- L70 - **TP:** Well nothing really. Things were quiet for the next hour. He was in his room. I don't know what he was doing in there, maybe texting his dad, I think that's what he does a lot when he's in his room.
- L71 - **Assessor:** Okay, so how did this resolve itself, how did this end?

- L72 - **TP:** Well, about an hour later, around 6:30, I knock on his door and asked if he wanted me to make him some dinner, and he said no. So I said okay, and I suggested some things he could make himself for dinner. Then I walked away and I started to deal with the laundry, folding clothes and putting stuff away.
- L73 - **Assessor:** What did he do?
- L74 - **TP:** He just stayed in his room all night. I heard him come out about 7:00 or 7:30 and go to the kitchen, so I assume he was getting some food. I asked him if he wanted me to cook him something and he said no.
- L75 - **Assessor:** Okay, so everyone just went to their respective corners and nothing was resolved?
- L76 - **TP:** Yes.
- L77 - **Assessor:** Did you and Michael ever apologize to each other for things getting out of hand?
- L78 - **TP:** No.
- L79 - **Assessor:** So was the next time you two interacted the following morning, when you took him to school?
- L80 - **TP:** Yes
- L81 - **Assessor:** What was that like, what was his attitude like the following morning?
- L82 - **TP:** He didn't say much, just sort of one-word answers. He seemed angry and sullen.
- L83 - **Assessor:** No morning greetings or hugs?
- L84 - **TP:** No, not really. I said good morning to him but he didn't say anything.
- L85 - **Assessor:** What was the morning drive to school like?
- L86 - **TP:** Quiet. He didn't say anything. I told him that his dad would be picking him up from school, but he didn't say anything. He just looked out the window the entire time.
- L87 - **Assessor:** Did you say goodbye when you dropped him off?
- L88 - **TP:** Yeah.
- L89 - **Assessor:** What did he say, did he say goodbye?
- L90 - **TP:** No, he just ignored me and got out of the car and walked away.
- L91 - **Assessor:** So he didn't say goodbye or anything when you dropped him off?
- L92 - **TP:** No, he just walked away.

2: Child Interview

The following is an example of a clinical interview with a child designed to elicit a behavior-chain sequence surrounding the same incident of parent-child conflict. The prior information from the interview with the parent can be used to inform clinical probes offered during the child interview.

Antecedent Phase

- L93 - **Assessor:** So why don't you like to be at your mom's house? What's the problem over there?
- L94 - **Child:** I just hate it over there. She's so mean and we're always getting in fights. She gets angry all the time, and things always have to be her way. If she doesn't get her way about everything she starts yelling.
- L95 - **Assessor:** You say she's angry and always has to have things her way, can you give me an example of that?
- L96 - **Child:** Yeah, like the other night. I wanted to get some fast food takeout for dinner and she's like, "No. We're not getting fast food takeout. You have to eat what's here." But there's no food in the house. But she's like, "No. We're not going out to eat." And I say there's no food in the house, but she doesn't care.
- L97 - **Assessor:** So was there no food in the house, or just nothing you wanted?
- L98 - **Child:** There was nothing.
- L99 - **Assessor:** Was there any bread or peanut butter or anything, breakfast cereal? Or was there absolutely no food whatsoever in the house?
- L100 - **Child:** Yeah, there was peanut butter and some cereal, but I didn't want that stuff for dinner. I wanted real food. I just wanted to go out and get some fast food takeout.
- L101 - **Assessor:** Okay. So there was some food in the house, but just not food you wanted for dinner. What was going on right before this argument happened? What were you doing before just before the fight started?
- L102 - **Child:** I don't know. I think I was in my room listening to music.
- L103 - **Assessor:** So you're in your room listening to music, and then what happened?
- L104 - **Child:** I asked my mom if we could get some fast food takeout for dinner.
- L105 - **Assessor:** So did you stop listening to your music and go out to find your mom to ask if you could have fast food takeout for dinner?
- L106 - **Child:** Yeah.
- L107 - **Assessor:** And what was your mom doing?
- L108 - **Child:** I don't know, she was just in the living room or something.

L109 - **Assessor:** So your mom's in the living room, and you're in your room listening to music. Then you get up, go out to your mom and ask her if you could get some fast food takeout for dinner, is that what happened?

L110 - **Child:** Yeah.

L111 - **Assessor:** Okay, and what did your mom say?

L112 - **Child:** She said no, that I could just eat whatever was at the house.

L113 - **Assessor:** Did she say why she wouldn't take you for fast food takeout?

L114 - **Child:** No.

L115 - **Assessor:** So she didn't give you any reason for not going to fast food takeout, she just said "No, eat what's in the house." Did she offer to make you dinner?

L116 - **Child:** Yeah, maybe. I can't remember. But I hate her cooking. It's awful. I just wanted to get some fast food takeout.

L117 - **Assessor:** So your mom may have offered to make you dinner?

L118 - **Child:** Yeah, I can't remember.

L119 - **Assessor:** Okay, but you didn't want her to make you dinner because you don't like what she cooks, you wanted to get some fast food takeout?

L120 - **Child:** Yeah.

L121 - **Assessor:** Do you not like anything she cooks, or is it only some things?

L122 - **Child:** No, it's everything. She's a horrible cook. Her cooking tastes like crap.

L123 - **Assessor:** What's so terrible about how her cooking tastes?

L124 - **Child:** It just tastes bad. She doesn't know how to cook. She thinks she does. She thinks she's so good at doing stuff, but she's not. Her cooking is horrible.

L125 - **Assessor:** What type of things does she cook that taste so bad, like is it basic chicken and hamburgers, or is it fancier stuff like casseroles, and chili, and homemade soups, things like that?

L126 - **Child:** It's everything.

L127 - **Assessor:** Even hamburgers and chicken?

L128 - **Child:** Yeah.

L129 - **Assessor:** What tastes bad about her hamburger and chicken? How can someone make a hamburger taste bad?

L130 - **Child:** I don't know. It just tastes horrible.

L131 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you go out and ask your mom to get some fast food takeout for dinner and she says no. And then what happens?

L132 - **Child:** So I say, "Why can't we get some fast food takeout. There's nothing to eat at the house."

L133 - **Assessor:** And what does she say?

L134 - **Child:** She says, "No. Just eat what we have in the house," and I say, "There's nothing to eat in the house."

L135 - **Assessor:** And what does she say to that?

L136 - **Child:** She starts getting all angry and yelling at me, calling me names and telling me to just eat what's in the house, and I keep telling her there's nothing to eat. But she doesn't care and she's just yelling at me calling me names.

L137 - **Assessor:** What sort of names is she calling you?

L138 - **Child:** She's saying I'm stubborn and rude.

L139 - **Assessor:** Were you being stubborn and rude?

L140 - **Child:** No.

L141 - **Assessor:** So you didn't say anything rude?

L142 - **Child:** No.

The Resolution Phase

L143 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you go out to ask your mom to get some fast food takeout for dinner, and she says, "No, just eat what's in the house." And you say, "But mom, there's nothing to eat in the house," and she says "I don't care, just eat what's in the house" and when you try to tell her there's nothing to eat in the house she starts to become angry and calls you stubborn and rude. Is that what happened?

L144 - **Child:** Yeah.

L145 - **Assessor:** Okay, and then what happened? She was angry and calling you stubborn and rude, what did you do?

L146 - **Child:** I just went to my room. She always has to have things her way. There's no discussing it with her. If you try to talk about it she gets all angry and starts yelling.

L147 - **Assessor:** So you didn't see the point in arguing with her, so you just went back to your room?

L148 - **Child:** Yeah.

L149 - **Assessor:** And then what happened? What did you do for dinner?

L150 - **Child:** A little while later I went out and had a bowl of cereal for dinner.

L151 - **Assessor:** So you make yourself a bowl of cereal for dinner?

L152 - **Child:** Yeah.

L153 - **Assessor:** Did you and your mom say anything to each other?

L154 - **Child:** No.

L155 - **Assessor:** So then what happened? Did you take the cereal back to your room to eat it?

L156 - **Child:** No, I ate it at the dining room table.

L157 - **Assessor:** Okay, and then what happened?

L158 - **Child:** Nothing. I just went back to my room.

L159 - **Assessor:** And what did you do in your room?

L160 - **Child:** I don't know. I just listened to music.

L161 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you went out, made yourself a bowl of cereal, ate it, and then went back to your room. Is that what happened?

L162 - **Child:** Yeah.

L163 - **Assessor:** So you and your mom never apologized to each other for the fight or anything?

L164 - **Child:** No.

L165 - **Assessor:** When you went out to make your cereal, did your mom ask you if you wanted her to make dinner for you?

L166 - **Child:** I don't know. Maybe. But I didn't want her to make dinner. Her food tastes awful.

L167 - **Assessor:** Okay. How about in the morning, did you and your mom talk in the morning, was everything okay, or was there still tension?

L168 - **Child:** We didn't talk.

L169 - **Assessor:** Why is that? Why do you think you two didn't talk, even the next day?

L170 - **Child:** I was still angry that she's so selfish and only thinks of herself. She only cares about herself and doesn't think about what anyone else wants. And then she gets angry and yells if you try to talk to her about what you want. I hate it over there.

L171 - **Assessor:** So you were still angry about what happened the night before? Did you say good morning to your mom?

L172 - **Child:** I don't know. I can't remember.

L173 - **Assessor:** Did your mom say good morning to you?

L174 - **Child:** I don't know. Maybe.

L175 - **Assessor:** So she drives you to school, did you talk about anything on the drive to school?

L176 - **Child:** No.

L177 - **Assessor:** So it was a quiet drive to school. Did she say goodbye to you when you got out of the car?

L178 - **Child:** Yeah, maybe.

L179 - **Assessor:** Did you say goodbye to her when you got out of the car?

L180 - **Child:** I don't know, I don't remember. Yeah, like maybe I said "bye" or something.

Response-to-Intervention Probes

L181 - **Assessor:** Okay, so your mom told me about this same incident, but her telling of the incident is a little bit different than the way you tell it. So, I'm confused about what happened. Let me run by you what your mom told me so that you can help me understand what happened.

L182 - **Assessor:** So your mom says the argument happened when she told you to get in the car, but you said it happened when you asked for fast food takeout. Did your mom ask you to get in the car?

L183 - **Child:** Yeah. She said like, "Get in the car, now."

L184 - **Assessor:** Okay, so she did tell you to get in the car? Why did she want you to get in the car, where did she want to go?

L185 - **Child:** She wanted to go to the store to buy some food, but I wanted fast food takeout. I hate her cooking.

L186 - **Assessor:** Okay, so she says "Get in the car" because she wants to go buy some food for dinner, but you want fast food takeout. So she didn't say, "Eat what's in the house," she actually wanted to go to the store to buy some food for dinner?

L187 - **Child:** Yeah, but then she said "Just eat whatever we had in the house."

L188 - **Assessor:** So did you get in the car to go buy food for dinner?

L189 - **Child:** No.

L190 - **Assessor:** So was it after you wouldn't get in the car to go to the store to buy food for dinner, was that when she said you'd just have to eat what's in the house?

L191 - **Child:** Yeah, I guess.

L192 - **Assessor:** Okay. And your mom said she didn't want to get fast food takeout because it costs more than cooking at home and she's on a budget, and that home cooking is healthier than fast food takeout. Does that make sense to you as a reason?

L193 - **Child:** No. She can afford fast food takeout, and it's healthy, it's not bad for you.

L194 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you don't think those are valid reasons. Your mom also said that you said her cooking tasted like garbage. Did you tell her that, that her food tasted like garbage?

L195 - **Child:** Yeah, it does. It tastes horrible. She thinks she's this great cook but she's not.

L196 - **Assessor:** Okay. She also said you called her some names, like a "stupid bitch" and an "f"-ing bitch." Did you call your mother a "stupid bitch"?

- L197 - **Child:** Yeah, she is. It's like everything has to be her way. She has to control everyone. And she gets all mad and yells if you don't do everything just the way she wants it.
- L198 - **Assessor:** Okay, so you called her a "stupid bitch," what about an "f"-ing bitch" did you say that to your mom too?
- L199 - **Child:** No. I can't remember.
- L200 - **Assessor:** No or you can't remember?
- L201 - **Child:** Maybe I did, I can't remember.
- L202 - **Assessor:** Okay, so maybe you called her that, but you just can't remember. Now you told me that your mom called you names, that she said you were stubborn and rude, right?
- L203 - **Child:** Yeah.
- L204 - **Assessor:** Okay. But if you refuse to get in the car and you refuse to eat anything that your mother cooks for dinner, but insist the only thing you'll eat is fast food takeout, isn't that being stubborn?
- L205 - **Child:** No. I hate her cooking, it tastes awful.
- L206 - **Assessor:** So if she makes a hamburger, grills a hamburger, puts some ketchup and mustard on it – do you like ketchup and mustard on your hamburgers? – how about lettuce? – okay so she puts some ketchup and mustard and lettuce on your hamburger, it tastes awful?
- L207 - **Child:** Yeah.
- L208 - **Assessor:** Why is that? That seems pretty basic. Why does it taste awful?
- L209 - **Child:** I don't know, it just does.
- L210 - **Assessor:** Okay. And you also said your mom called you rude, right?
- L211 - **Child:** Yeah.
- L212 - **Assessor:** Now if you called your mom a "stupid bitch" – and maybe even an "f"-ing bitch," wouldn't that be considered rude?
- L232 - **Child:** Yeah, maybe. But she deserves it. She's... I hate it over there.
- L214 - **Assessor:** Okay. So just one more thing. You said you told your mom that her cooking tastes like garbage, and that you called her a "stupid bitch" for not taking you to get fast food takeout, and maybe even an "f"-ing bitch" – you can't remember, but she says you did – and here's what I'm wondering, I'm wondering if it hurts your mom's feelings when you say things like that to her, when you call her cooking "garbage" and call her names like that, do you think it hurts her feelings?
- L215 - **Child:** No.
- L216 - **Assessor:** No? Why not? Why wouldn't that hurt her feelings?
- L217 - **Child:** She doesn't care about anyone. She only cares about herself.

Analysis of Behavior-Chain Interview with the Targeted Parent

L1 – L4

During this initial interview segment with the parent, the Assessor begins shaping the parent's response to be specific. The Assessor begins by asking about the antecedent period (L1) and the parent provides a general response (L2). The Assessor seeks further clarification of this general response into more specific behavior (L3) and the parent responds with greater specificity (L4). Behavior-chains require specificity. The use of global characterizations should be inquired about for greater specificity of behavior and feelings.

L5-L9

The Assessor begins to establish the sequential interview process of the behavior-chain (L5). When the parent responds with the next behavior, the Assessor probes this behavior for further detail (L7), communicating to the parent that the interviewer is seeking details about the exchanges that occurred between the parent and child. The Assessor's probe (L7) also collects additional information about parenting behaviors, such as offering transitional warnings and respect for the child's rhythms, that may have contributed to the subsequent conflict. The parent responds that an appropriate level of foreknowledge was available to allow the child to cooperate with the parental directive (L8). The Assessor then leads the parent into the conflict with the child (L9).

L10 – L17

The parent offers a global description of the child's behavior (L10), so the Assessor seeks additional clarification of the global description into specific behavior (L11). The parent provides a specific behavior (L12) and the Assessor seeks additional specificity (L13) related to parenting skills of gaining the child's cooperation and respect for the child versus the use of authoritarian command structures. The parent provides a clarification (L14) and the Assessor offers a reflection of understanding (L15) before continuing with the behavior-chain (L17).

L18 – L28

The parent begins the description of behaviors (L18) and the Assessor seeks additional clarification regarding parenting skills of communication versus command structures (L19). These clinical probes of the parent are designed to elicit information about the behavior of the parent that could be contributing factors to the parent-child conflict and could potentially be subsequently targeted for intervention (improved parental communication). The parent's response (L20) was a little unclear, so the Assessor sought additional clarity on the specifics of the behavior-chain sequence (L21). The parent provides additional clarity on the exact behavior-chain sequence (L22), and the Assessor offers a reflection of understanding (L23).

Before proceeding, however, the Assessor seeks additional specific clarity on words used in the parent-child communication (L25). If the child states that he "hates" his mother's

cooking, this represents an attribution of causality from the child for the child's non-cooperation, and attributions of causality will become a line of inquiry with the child as to why the child hates his mother's cooking. So obtaining specificity regarding the child's attributions of causality (L27) will be important to unraveling the dysfunctional relationship and communication.

L29 – L45

The Assessor continues with the behavior-chain (L29) and probes for the emotional tone of the parent (L31) that could reveal parenting skills and communication factors involved in escalating the conflict. The parent's reporting has seemingly been shaped into the desired specificity (L34). The Assessor probes the possible reality basis for the child's criticism of the parent (L35). The parent asserts that there is no reality basis to the child's criticism (L36). Despite the parent's assurances, the Assessor continues with this line of inquiry to make a more independent assessment regarding the potential reality basis of the child's criticism (L37-40). When the parent reveals that she was going to discuss and cooperate with the child in decision making (L39), which is a positive parenting skill for eliciting child cooperation, the Assessor probes this more fully (L41) and reveals a possible subsequent intervention in the area of developing mutual cooperation (L42).

Before proceeding with the behavior-chain (L45), the Assessor returns to the earlier criticism of the parent's cooking and seeks clarification on specific word usage (L43), since this criticism is socially insensitive and impolite (if we wouldn't tell a hostess at a party that her cooking tasted like "garbage," why should we say it to anyone?) which may be a line of inquiry with the child.

L46 – L48

The parent indicates that she was moving the situation forward with the child by asserting parental authority (L46). The Assessor will return to this assertion of parental authority as a parenting skill using a clinical probe later in the behavior-chain assessment (L53-L56), but in the current context the Assessor seeks information on the child's response to the assertion of parental authority (L47). According to the parent, the child responds to the assertion of parental authority by escalating the conflict and the child reportedly becomes verbally hostile toward the parent (L48). The parent's response also contains a possible indicator of the child's potential triangulation into the spousal conflict because the child apparently extends the two-person conflict with his mother into a three-person conflict involving his father (L48).

L49 – L56

The assessor seeks further clarification and specificity on the global descriptor "called me names" regarding the specific words used in the conflict (L49). The parent's response suggests a possible inverted hierarchy in which the child is judging the parent, as evidenced in the child extending an argument about dinner into making global criticisms of the parent as a person (L50). The Assessor seeks information about the parent's response to the child's hostility and defiance (L51). The parent indicates she responded to the child's defiance and hostility with increased frustration (anger) and the continued assertion of

parental authority, leading to an ultimatum rather than continuing dialogue (L52). This indicates a possible domain for intervention in improving parental responses to child defiance and expressions of hostility from the child.

The Assessor probes parenting skills of cooperation with the child's desires (L53), and the parent provides her rationale for her parenting choices (L54). These rationales appear reasonable and within normal-range parenting, which can be explored during the interview with the child regarding normal-range child cooperation with parental authority.

L57 – L64

The Assessor returns to collecting the behavior-chain sequence (L57) probing for specificity regarding the ultimatum and its potential for problematic parenting (L57-L62) and seeks information about the child's response to the assertion of parental authority through an ultimatum (L63). The parent indicates that the child further escalated the conflict into profanity directed toward his mother and he was unable to contain his emotions and behavior sufficiently to develop a cooperative relationship with his mother's assertion of parental authority (L64). The child exhibits additional indications of possible triangulation as the child turns the two-person conflict with his mother surrounding dinner into a three-person conflict involving his father (L64).

L65 – L72

The Assessor continues the collection of behavior-chain data (L65). The parent reports her parenting response was to allow the child to disengage (L66) because she had reached the limit of her parenting skills. Of note is that she did not continue escalating the conflict by continuing her assertion of parental authority. She offered the child a choice (to get in the car to buy food for dinner or to eat what was available at home) and she respected the child's choice (L65) without trying to enforce her will upon him that he get in the car.

The Assessor begins to acquire information about the resolution phase (L67), and the parent indicates that, although she was angry, she continued in her responsibilities as a parent surrounding dinner (L68). The parent indicates that the resolution of the parent-child conflict was merely to disengage from each other (L70). The possibility that the child was texting his father following the conflict with his mother also raises the possibility of the child's triangulation into the spousal conflict by turning a two-person mother-son conflict into a three-person, parent-child-parent, conflict.

As the Assessor continues collection of the behavior-chain sequence regarding the resolution of conflict (L71), the parent indicates that she was able to collect herself emotionally and reorganize from her anger sufficiently to continue in her parenting role (L72) and that she employs a parenting style of offering the child choices and respecting the choices of her child (L72).

L73 – L92

The Assessor proceeds to collect information about the child's response to the mother's parenting behavior (L73), and she indicates that the child maintained his disengagement

(L74). The Assessor offers a summarizing reflection of understanding (L75) and probes for normal-range social skills for repairing relationship breaches (apologies). The Assessor then extends the behavior-chain inquiry into the following morning, to examine if the relationship was ever restored or if the disengagement was maintained over time (L79). The Assessor probes for shared affection (L83) and normal-range social skills (L84; L89).

Parenting Practices Rating Scale

Based on this initial interview with the mother, her rating on the *Parenting Practices Rating Scale* (Childress, 2016) would likely be in the Level 4 range (17: Affectionate Involvement – Structured Spectrum). In her reporting on the behavior-chain sequence, the mother indicated that she asserted reasonable parental authority, and when her authority was challenged she continued with the assertion of parental structure rather than shifting to a dialogue approach. By allowing the child to disengage and then re-approaching the child later with an offer of nurture (making him dinner), she appeared to indicate a normal-range capacity for affectionate responding (additional interview data would improve the stability and quality of the rating).

Based on both the child’s and mother’s reporting in the behavior-chain sequence, the mother’s Permissive to Authoritarian Dimension Rating would likely be in the 55 to 65 range, entirely within the normal-range spectrum.

The mother’s rating on her Capacity for Authentic Empathy would likely be a 3, since she allowed her frustrated and angry child to disengage from the conflict (L68-L74), she offered him choices and respected his choices (L53; L72), and she reached out on several occasions to reestablish their relationship (L72; L74; L84; L88) while also respecting his desire to remain disengaged.

On the *Parenting Practices Rating Scale*, there would be no Parental Issues of Clinical Concern based on the information contained in the behavior-chain sequence.

Analysis of Behavior-Chain Assessment Example 2: Child Interview

L93 – L96

The Assessor begins with an open ended question to elicit the child's attribution of causality for the parent-child conflict (L93). The child offers a series of global descriptions (L94) and the Assessor begins the process of obtaining specific behaviors (L95). This leads the child into a description of the parent-child conflict described by the parent in her earlier interview (L96).

If the child had indicated a different incident, the Assessor would have collected behavior-chain information from the child about the incident raised by the child, and then in a subsequent interview with the targeted parent the Assessor would collect behavior-chain information from the parent regarding this second incident raised by the child. In addition, prior to ending the current interview session with the child, the Assessor would raise the fast food and dinner incident previously described by the parent, and would collect an additional behavior-chain sequence from the child's perspective regarding the incident described by the parent.

Behavior-chain sequences should always be collected from both perspectives in the parent-child conflict. The order in which the information is collected from the parent and child is not as relevant, as long as both perspectives are collected in the format of a specific behavior-chain sequence of interactions (although if the parent interview is conducted first, then the information from the parent interview can be used in clinical probes with the child regarding the child's perspective).

When there is considerable disagreement in the individual perspectives on what actually occurred during a parent-child conflict, then additional joint parent-child sessions can be conducted to review the behavior-chain sequence with both participants present to develop a consensus on what occurred (where that is possible), and to highlight the differences in perspective when they are unable to reach a shared consensus on the sequence of events that occurred during their conflict.

L97 – L100

The Assessor begins collecting the behavior-chain sequence starting with where the child began the description (L97), seeking clarifying specifics regarding the child's statements. The Assessor will return to the antecedent phase later in the interview (L101). The child's account that there was no food in the house (L98) is discrepant from the parent's account (L52; L58-61; L68). This raises issues surrounding credibility of reporting; either the parent is not an accurate reporter or the child is not an accurate reporter. In addition to examining significant discrepancies in reporting, the Assessor should apply clinical judgement regarding the reasonableness of the reported stories in assessing credibility. Does it seem reasonable, based on the Assessor's experience in interviewing the parent, that this parent had no food whatsoever in the house and was lying in saying she had apples, and soup, and cereal, and peanut butter, and bread, and that she was lying when she reported that she offered to make him a grilled cheese sandwich, or is it more likely that the child is distorting and exaggerating his report in order to justify his anger?

In addition to using clinical judgement, the Assessor specifically examines this discrepancy between the parent's and the child's reporting (L99) and the child acknowledges the accuracy of the parent's report (L100). The child's discounting of food being available in the house is possibly suggestive of entitlement (a narcissistic personality symptom rather than an oppositional-defiant symptom).

L101 – L110

After this initial engagement, the Assessor then returns to the behavior-chain sequence beginning with the antecedent phase (L101). The child offers a general response. Recollection can be improved by cueing for specific aspects of the sensory environment, such as asking what song the child was listening to, or asking what the child's room looks like. But the Assessor in this circumstance moves past this early antecedent phase into the directly cueing events for the conflict (L103).

The child's description is once again divergent from the parent's description. The mother indicated that the conflict began when she asked him to get in the car to go to the store (L6). The child omits this aspect of reporting on the events and proceeds to his asking for fast food takeout (L104). Again, the clinical judgment of the Assessor can be applied to the differing accounts, and any discrepancy should also be examined more closely during the interview. The Assessor delays this specific examination of the discrepancy (L181) until the child's behavior-chain sequence is collected so as not to unduly disrupt the child's account of events. However, the Assessor seeks specific information regarding the discrepancy by asking "what was your mom doing?" (L107). The Assessor then verifies the child's account by offering a reflection of understanding (L109).

L111 – L118

The Assessor then proceeds with collecting the behavior-chain sequence (L111) and the child's reporting again evidences a discrepancy from the mother's reporting. The child omits the mother's reporting about getting in the car and that his refusal to get in the car resulted in an ultimatum to either get into car to go to the store to buy some food for dinner, or else the child would have to eat whatever was around the house (L52). Instead, the child indicates that the mother simply told him to eat whatever he could find around the house (L112). The Assessor clarifies the child's report, offering a cue regarding the mother's possible motivations for saying that he'd have to eat whatever was around the house (L113). The Assessor also cues a specific account reported by the mother that she offered to make him dinner (L72; L74; L115). In response to this specific cueing by the Assessor, the child's response becomes more equivocal (L116) before asserting why his mother preparing dinner for him was an unacceptable alternative from his perspective (L116). In response to the child's equivocation, the Assessor seeks additional clarity (L117) and the child seems to confirm the mother's account.

L119 – L130

The Assessor returns to the behavior-chain sequence by offering a summary reflection of understanding (L119) and then seeks clarifying specificity regarding the child's feelings and motivations (L121). When the child indicates a global dislike for everything his mother

cooks, the Assessor seeks additional specificity regarding the child's feelings and perspective (L123). In response to this inquiry for specificity, the child again offers a global response so the Assessor inquires again for specificity (L125). But again, the child offers a global response (L126) so again the Assessor seeks additional specificity (L127; L129). Even though there are additional inquiries for specificity, the child continues to provide only global responses (L130), so the Assessor moves on. The inability to provide specificity and the questionable veracity that even hamburgers and chicken prepared by his mother tastes bad suggests that the child's global attributions of causality for not liking his mother's cooking may not be an accurate attribution of causality.

L131 - L140

The Assessor continues with the behavior-chain sequence (L131) and the child describes his mother's apparent inflexibility (L134) and anger (L136). When the child refers to his mother calling him "names" (L136), the Assessor examines this global descriptor for increased specificity (L137). When the child reports on the descriptors she used for his behavior (stubborn and rude), the Assessor probes for the accuracy of these descriptors when applied to the child's behavior at the time (L139) in the context of the mother's reporting that he refused to get in the car, would not eat anything his mother cooked, that he said his mother's cooking tasted like "garbage," and that he called his mother a "stupid bitch" and an "f***ing bitch." If the mother's reporting is accurate, the descriptors she used for his behavior were accurate, he was being stubborn and he was being rude. In denying his mother's account (L140), three possibilities emerge, 1) he did not act in the way his mother reported and the mother is providing inaccurate information of great specificity (i.e., she's lying), or 2) he is indicating that he lacks insight into his behavior, or 3) he is providing a selective and self-serving account the conflict.

L141 - L166

The Assessor confirms that there is a discrepancy in reporting (L141-L142) and then returns to the behavior-chain with a summary reflection of understanding (L143-L145), and the child begins reporting on the resolution of the conflict (L146). The Assessor continues the collection of the behavior-chain (L149), seeking specificity in the behavior-chain description (L149-155). The Assessor cues a probe for the accuracy of the child's reporting regarding the mother's report that she offered to make him dinner when he came out of his room (L74; L153-L154). The Assessor offers a summary reflection of understanding regarding the resolution of the conflict (L161) and then proceeds to confirm the mother's reporting about no apologies (L77; L163). The Assessor offers a clinical probe regarding the possibility of self-serving bias in the reporting of either the mother or the child (L165) and the child seems to confirm the mother's account that she offered to make him dinner (L166).

L167 - L180

The Assessor then proceeds into the events of the following morning to confirm (or disconfirm) the mother's reporting on these events (L167). The child seems to substantially confirm the mother's reporting surrounding the morning's events (L168; 171-

180). The Assessor also probes for the child's attribution of causality regarding the emotionally distant parent-child relationship on the following morning (L169-L170).

L181- L217

Having obtained the child's reporting on the behavior-chain sequence, the Assessor then begins a set of clinical probes regarding the discrepancies in reporting between the mother's perception of the behavior-chain sequence and the child's perception of the behavior-chain sequence (L181).

The Assessor begins with the discrepancy on how the conflict began (L182; L6; L104-L106) and the child confirms the mothers' account (L183; L185) that he omitted from his own reporting on the behavior-chain sequence (potentially to cast his mother in a more negative light of being entirely unreasonable and himself as being the victim of his mother's supposedly unreasonable behavior). Since the child's account changed, the Assessor confirms the child's new account which is consistent with the mother's prior reporting (L186-L191).

The Assessor then probes the child's ability to de-center and take the perspective of another by asking the child about the mother's reasons for not wanting to buy him fast food takeout for dinner (L192). The child, however, appears to have difficulty de-centering from his own self-focus sufficiently to adopt the perspective of another person (L193).

The Assessor then probes for the specific reports from the mother that the child was discourteous and mean (L194; L196; L198). The Assessor links this line of inquiry to the child's report that his mother called him names, specifically "stubborn" and "rude," (L138; L202) and probes the child's capacity for self-insight into his own behavior (L204; L212).

The final clinical probe by the Assessor surrounds the child's capacity for empathy (L214; L216).