

Identifying Christian Principles in PCIT: Improving Commitment with Conservative Christian Parents

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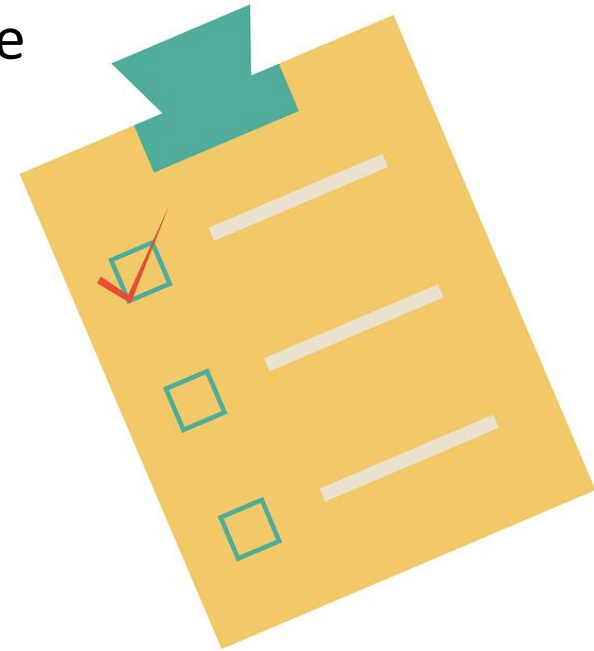
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Learning Objectives

1. Understand a conservative evangelical Christian worldview as it pertains to parenting and therapy.
2. Identify potential barriers to treatment for conservative evangelical Christian families, and recognize whether religious principles should be overtly discussed.
3. Increase buy-in and enrichment of the PCIT process for conservative evangelical Christian families.
4. Describe how the standard PCIT approach is highly supportive of Christian values and ideals.
5. Understand how healthy attachment bonds in childhood encourage healthy spirituality into adulthood.
6. Demonstrate how the Christian teachings of prevenient grace, unconditional love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are exhibited through the structure and process of PCIT.



PCIT's Efficacy and Effectiveness Across Culture Groups

- Statistically and clinically significant across culture groups (Bjørseth, & Wichstrøm, 2016; Leung et al., 2008; Lyon and Budd, 2010; Matos, et al., 2009; McCabe & Yeh, 2009; Phillips et al., 2008)
- Tailoring may be critical to address a family's beliefs about problem behaviors and parenting styles. (Eyberg, 2005; McCabe et al., 2005)
- No published studies have addressed whether the beliefs of conservative evangelical families may impact their willingness to begin or complete PCIT.
- Though most evangelical Christians are not opposed to therapy, a significant minority have major concerns. (Beck, 1997; Esau, 1998; Powlison, 2010)

What is an evangelical Christian?

National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) developed these four belief statements that evangelicals have in common (LifeWay Research, 2015):

- 1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.**
- 2. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.**
- 3. Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.**
- 4. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.**

What is an evangelical Christian?

- Only 59% of those who consider themselves “evangelical” agree with all four statements. (NAE/LifeWay research, 2015)
- Only 25% of African Americans who agree with all four statements consider themselves “evangelical.” (NAE/LifeWay research, 2015)
- 76% of white adults in the U.S. identify as “evangelical” compared to 6% of black adults and 11% of Latino adults. (Pew Research Center, 2014)

What is an evangelical Christian?

- 76% of white adults in the U.S. identify as “evangelical” compared to 6% of black adults and 11% of Latino adults. (Pew Research Center, 2014)
- However, more black adults than white adults (Pew Research Center, 2014):
 - are “Absolutely certain” in their belief in God (B=83%; W=61%)
 - attend religious services weekly (B=47%; W=32%)
 - read scripture weekly (B=54%; W=32%)
 - believe the Bible to be the Word of God and that it should be taken literally (B=51%; W=26%)
- I will focus on belief and practice, rather than identity.

Barriers to therapy

- Rigid reliance on religious authorities (Aten et al., 2010)
- Belief that the Bible provides all the necessary teaching for right living (Beck, 1997; Powlison, 2010; Yarhouse & Russell, 2006)
- Spiritualizing problems (Aten et al., 2010; Powlison, 2010)
- Anxiety over naturalistic explanations of behavior (Narramore, 1973)
- Tendency of mental health professionals to have a superficial understanding of faith (Beck, 1997; Esau, 1998; McMinn et al., 2010; Narramore, 1973)

Attitudes about parenting

- **Parenting is a sanctified role** (Murray-Swank et al., 2006)
 - Sanctification: considering objects, relationships, roles to be sacred. (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005)
 - Murray-Swank et al. (2006) found that holding this perspective tends to result in greater warmth within the relationship.
- **Holding views of the Bible as literal and inerrant is positively predictive of the use of corporal punishment** (Bartkowski & Ellison, 2009; Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009; Ellison et al., 1996; Martinez et al., 2018; Murray-Swank et al., 2006)
 - Perhaps due to passages like “Whoever spares the rod hates their children...” Proverbs 13:24

How PCIT Reflects Christian Teachings

- **God intentionally displays unconditional love and prevenient grace** (Borsheuer et al., 2012)
 - “I pray that you may... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...” (Eph. 3:18-19)
 - Nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God...” (Rom. 8:39)
 - “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)
 - “God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)
- **PCIT Phase 1** (McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2010)
 - Parents interact positively with children, regardless of past behavior
 - Coached on extreme encouragement and intentionality in their show of love and support
 - Phase 2 teaches discipline techniques, but positive interaction skills must be consistently displayed first.

How PCIT Reflects Christian Teachings

- **Discipline matters** (Borsheuer et al., 2012; Walker & Quagliana, 2007)
 - Hebrews 12:4-11 parallels God's discipline to parental discipline and says it "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."
 - "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." Proverbs 13:24
- **Discipline shouldn't be any more aversive than necessary and should set up an opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation** (Borsheuer et al., 2012)
 - John 21:15-17: Jesus allows Peter the opportunity to undo the wrong, making it clear he is forgiven and reconciled without explicitly saying so.

How PCIT Reflects Christian Teachings

- **PCIT Phase 2: Time out in 3-minute segments that continue until compliance.** (McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2010)
 - When compliance happens, parent acknowledges and gives another simple command to follow
 - This allows for an easy undoing of the wrong and immediate reconciliation
 - Forgiveness is experienced but not directly stated
 - Parent is required to move on from the wrong without further discussion and without unpleasant emotional expression

Attachment and Spiritual Development

Attachment styles persist into adulthood (Main, 2000)

- Adult relationships are impacted by attachment style
- Children are impacted by adult's attachment style, with prediction rates at 75-percent accuracy



Attachment and Spiritual Development

- McDonald et al. (2005) found support for the “correspondence hypothesis”: Most people show consistency between early caregiver attachment and adult God attachment.
 - Emotionally cold homes (Rejecting-Neglecting) → Avoidance of intimacy with God
 - Authoritarian homes → Avoidance of intimacy and anxiety over whether God loves them
 - Secure caregiver attachment → Secure God attachment in adulthood
 - Even after a conversion experience in which the person sees God as compensating for faulty caregiver attachment, the correspondence model seems to eventually play the larger role in terms of relational connection to God.

Attachment and Spiritual Development

- When individuals have a secure attachment bond with **caregivers**, they (Beck, 2006):
 - Explore freely and without anxiety as long as caregiver location is known
 - Experience distress when separated from caregiver
 - Gain courage from the secure base of “home” to take risks and face challenges as an adolescent
- When individuals have a secure attachment bond with **God**, they (Beck, 2006):
 - Show more willingness to explore a variety of theological ideas
 - Display increased tolerance toward those with other beliefs
 - Report a greater sense of peace and contentment in spiritual life
 - Still hold to core tenets of their faith

Increasing buy-in and enriching the process

- Determine early on whether parents are interested in discussing faith during the therapy process.
- Familiarize yourself with their faith perspective as much as possible.
- Carefully consider how you present an alternative viewpoint.
 - E.g., Do not equate spanking with abuse. Rather, describe the challenges of using it consistently, point out how it only works rarely or inconsistently, and ask if they wouldn't prefer a more reliable method that doesn't rely on inflicting pain (I've never had a parent say no to this.)

Increasing buy-in and enriching the process

- Weave in specific topics/scriptures briefly as appropriate (Walker & Quagliana, 2007) – especially in teaching sessions.
- Can be included in brief coaching statements if it isn't new information.
 - E.g., “Your consistent positive engagement despite her earlier behavior is really showing your unconditional love for her.”
 - E.g., Following the time-out sequence, “Now you'll give a simple command so he can experience some redemption.”

Increasing buy-in and enriching the process

- Do not totally eschew discussing empirical evidence, but balance it with a faith-based rationale for the specific tools and the order of phases
- For parents who over-spiritualize defiant behavior: Provide scriptural evidence that we are **all** sinful and defiant (Romans 3:23), but some behaviors are more disruptive than others. Even so, it is helpful to imitate Christ in our approach to correction.

Getting them in the door

- Understand that most church-goers will seek help from their pastors first. (Esau, 1998)
- Get to know the pastors in your area. (McMinn et al., 2010)
- Acknowledge your own limitations on religious/spiritual issues: Make consultation a 2-way street. (McMinn et al., 2010)
- Consider partnering with churches.
 - Offer workshops/seminars to church staff, Sunday school classes, etc.
 - Arrangements with larger churches to financially assist parishioners who are referred by their pastors.

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