



Northeastern Family Institute

Bringing Vermont Children, Families, and Communities Together

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Reframing

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Reframing is the capacity to alter, change, and reappraise a problem or situation by considering it from another perspective. It is an act of replacement; reframing occurs when we exchange a (negative) feeling, thought, and belief about ourself or about something or someone else with another (asset-based, positive) feeling, thought or belief. It is not simply a technique; it is a socio-political practice to see ourselves and our students/clients differently, and in the process build more equitable and just systems. Reframing can be an act of resistance where we contest and challenge long held and dominant beliefs, often about people who have been marginalized.

By looking at something from a different perspective, we can change its context and thus its meaning. Once we do so, we build a “second theory” or alternate way of perceiving a situation. By considering things from multiple perspectives, we provide ourselves, and others, with more options and more possibilities for success, autonomy and competence. When we are courageous enough to challenge our own “first theory”, we move from fixed to flexible, and from restrictive to expansive. Along the way, we increase our emotional and cognitive agility.

Think about reframing within the context of its “substitutes” like relabeling, re-classifying, re-categorizing, re-purposing or challenging the status quo. By reframing, we accept that “ours” is not the only way to see, perceive, name and understand the world. Once we get *in the habit* of reframing, we are more likely to challenge binary, dualistic and highly restrictive thinking, and eventually become inclined to accept a “both/ and” position. Some fundamental questions to ask ourselves (and each other) to promote and prompt a “reframing mindset” is, “What else can this be?”, “How might that person be viewing this situation?”, and “How am I benefiting from seeing things this way?”.

When working with youth, reframing can have its most profound utility when our conventional and traditional ways of viewing certain problematic behaviors are not successful. Instead of relying on singular, unidimensional labels, names and viewpoints (e.g. that student is “defiant, avoidant, unmotivated, rude), we consider other labels, names and descriptions of that problematic behavior. When we reframe, we are not totally discounting our initial name, label or classification, we are merely considering other options and alternatives. By doing so we accept that “more than one thing” can be true about someone (and ourselves) at any given time. We are a complex species, and we each of us can be “walking contradictions”.

Often, when a “reframe” (rename) is successful, the youth experiences it as a “*pleasant surprise*”. They might be hearing something about themselves, for the first time, in a new light. The novelty of the reframe is also part of its power and allure. When a youth who is being “defiant” hears from us that they are “tenacious, determined, strong, decisive, and standing her ground”, we offer a dramatic change in meaning, and with it, often a change in our dynamics. When an adult

experiences a student/client differently, it leaves room for them to experience themselves differently. This can be powerfully received and evoke a sense of (finally) feeling understood.

Keep in mind that children and adolescents do not want to ruin their relationships with adults (as much as it can sometimes feel so); it is not in their interest to do so. Reframing offers both the adult and the youth a “new and different” experience and understanding of one another. This “renewal” can help to shape the next time we interact. An abundant amount of research into adult self-regulation has found that those who reframe behaviors (towards a more positive view) are more flexible, resilient, calm and better able to maintain their own well-being.

Reframing asks us to think about what the “adaptive or positive value” of a behavior might be, while trying to see the conduct “in a different light”. As Stuart Shanker, Ph.D., states, “See a child differently and you’ll see a different child”. And finally, reframing both requires and increases our ability to be innovative, creative and imaginative; these are required skills to succeed in the complex world of 2025.

Below is a sampling of how to use reframing:

Student/ Client’s Action:	The typical emotions/thoughts / beliefs of the student/client:	Reframe: What else might this be? Both/And Develop a second theory Challenge the status quo	Adult Response: Empathy Validation Humility Joining
Defiance Resistance Refusal Opposition Stubborn	○ You are not helpful ○ Your values are not my values ○ This is rigged against me ○ You don’t listen to <i>me</i>! ○ Helplessness ○ Feeling unsafe ○ I don’t trust you can help ○ I feel alone, scared ○ I feel stupid ○ I am not capable ○ Requests from adults feels threatening ○ I don’t trust people that Sound, Act, Look (SAL) like you	○ Tireless/Persistent ○ Creating distance. ○ Strong-willed/ Fierce ○ Passionate/Has Fortitude ○ Self-protective/Self-advocate ○ Has a strong voice ○ Determined ○ Speak your mind ○ Standing your ground ○ I know what is best for me ○ Dignity ○ Tenacious/Bold /Formidable ○ Clear/Transparent: ○ Practicing autonomy and agency ○ Ability to feel strong ○ Mistrusting/Cautious ○ I want to be in charge of myself ○ If I don’t stick up for myself, no one will ○ Strong sense of social justice ○ Fiercely independent ○ Assertive ○ Unwilling to submit to an authority	○ “You are being quite strong in how you are standing up for yourself” ○ “You are trusting what your body needs” ○ “It sounds like you need to listen to yourself and not me” ○ “I appreciate how clear you are being” ○ “Let’s figure out together how to deal with this” ○ “I can see how determined ○ It is critical that you stay strong right now” ○ You are trying hard to find your voice with me”

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Threats Demands	○ You won't keep me safe ○ You are dangerous to me ○ You don't listen to me ○ I don't matter here ○ I feel powerless ○ I feel vulnerable ○ I don't trust people that Sound, Act, Look (SAL) like you	○ Establishing a firm boundary ○ Being strong is important ○ Decisive ○ Desires safety and security ○ Being in charge ○ Knowing what they need ○ Able to feel safe ○ Creating a "property line" ○ Protesting something ○ Transparent ○ Tough/Strong/Clear ○ Declarative ○ Forceful	○ "It is important that you feel in charge right now" ○ "You are being very clear about your needs" ○ "You really need me to back off" ○ You are very good at taking care of yourself" ○ "Being strong is very important to you right now" ○ "You care a lot about how things go right now"
Avoidance/ Passivity/ Defeated/ Helpless • Head down on desk • Wandering around • "I can't do this" • Self-sabotage	○ Your demands don't make sense ○ You can't stop me from doing "nothing" ○ You are not in charge of me. ○ You're moving too fast. ○ This is not <u>relevant</u> to me! ○ I cannot trust you ○ I don't feel competent ○ I feel worthless ○ I feel helpless ○ Why should I even try if I know I will fail ○ You won't help me out or meet my needs	○ Excellent self-advocate ○ Need time to recover ○ Able to create distance from perceived source of pain ○ Watchful ○ Decisive: Good at using their power ○ Know their limits ○ Able to endure, accept things as they are ○ Avoiding danger and distress ○ Seeking Safety and Sanctuary ○ Trying to regain control ○ Self-agency ○ Protective ○ Following your instincts ○ Struggling with confidence ○ Hiding in plain site ○ Preserving resources ○ Preventing shame/humiliation ○ Don't want to be seen	○ "I can see that you might be worried about _____" ○ "I appreciate how clear you are being (about what you need)" ○ "You seem to know what you need" ○ "You make clear decisions about what is best for you." ○ "I think I am not doing a good job reaching you" ○ "You really need to do things your way right now"
Impulsive Talkative Pestering Annoyance	○ I have a voice! ○ Your rules don't make sense to me ○ You won't see me ○ I need to get it now or I won't get it ○ I am not important	○ Eager/Helpful ○ Passionate ○ Wants to be heard/ seen ○ Persistent ○ Spontaneous ○ Daring ○ Energetic ○ Action orientated ○ Intense involvement/interest ○ Fearless	○ "I like how eager/helpful you are" ○ "I notice how important it is for you to participate/show me how _____ you are" ○ "This is really important to you"

	○ I am not seen, heard ○ I am alone ○ I need to be always seen		○ It is important that you are really heard”
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Demanding Controlling “Bossy”	○ You don’t care about my needs ○ Only I will meet my own needs ○ You’re not in charge of my body ○ I am not important ○ Powerless	○ Clear about needs ○ Bold ○ Passionate ○ Intense ○ Self-agency ○ Decisive ○ Good at structuring their environment ○ Want to be seen ○ Self-advocacy ○ Wanting to influence others	○ “I can see how critical it is to do things your way, you are really clear about that...” ○ “I like how strong your opinions are, lets figure out how to do that by” ○ “It is important to do things your way” ○ “You are really clear about what is best for you” ○ “I bet it feels better to know you are making the decisions”
Unmotivated “Lazy” Uncaring	○ This is not relevant to me ○ I have other things to put my energy into ○ These are not my values or interests ○ I feel vulnerable ○ I am not important ○ Whatever I do fails ○ I am helpless	○ Independent minded ○ Good at self-protection ○ Careful ○ Cautious ○ Clear about strengths/ challenges ○ Understanding limitations ○ Decisive ○ Self-Protective ○ Misunderstood ○ Laid back ○ Preserving personal resources ○ Selective	○ “I haven’t done a good job making this important/interesting to you” ○ “Glad you are giving us a chance to figure this out together” ○ “You seem really good about communicating your needs/preferences” ○ “You have a lot of other things to worry about/deal with”
“Manipulative” Attention Seeking	○ You won’t look out for my interests ○ You only see me when I am “bad” ○ I feel insecure and uncertain ○ I want help, but my way ○ I don’t trust I will get what I need	○ Connection seeking ○ Validation seeking ○ Safety seeking ○ Self-advocating ○ Safety seeking ○ Resourceful ○ Knowing how to get what you need from adults ○ Needing closeness	○ “You really want me to know what you need” ○ “I like how you are practicing ways to communicate/be clear with me” ○ “I sometimes worry that you think you can’t be direct about your needs”

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Running/ Elopement	○ You are not safe to me ○ You are not listening ○ You're not offering what I need ○ Powerless ○ Passive to active ○ What I am trying is not working ○ I am in danger here	○ Taking charge ○ Having a good back-up plan ○ Exploring options and possibilities ○ Seeking refuge/safety ○ Flexible ○ Decisive ○ Paying attention to body needs ○ Good at taking action to help yourself ○ Exploring options ○ Reading the room ○ Eluding danger ○ Escaping something painful or uncomfortable	○ "You trusted what your body needed" ○ "You really needed a break from..." ○ "I noticed you took care of yourself the way you thought best" ○ "You were able to get/pursue what you needed"
Aggression Being hurtful	○ You pose a threat to me. ○ You don't understand me ○ You are crowding me ○ I am in danger ○ I feel alone	○ I am tough and decisive ○ I can protect myself ○ I am setting a limit ○ Unsure of your own strength ○ Pain is inevitable so I must strike first	○ "It is important that I know how tough and determined you are" ○ "You let me know how frustrated and fed up you were"
Dishonesty "Lying"	○ You are not safe or trustworthy ○ You will harm me ○ I am in danger ○ I must navigate around you. ○ I anticipate that the "truth" will get me. ○ I am stressed	○ Self-protective ○ Savvy ○ Self-agency ○ Able to read others ○ Relief seeking	○ "I am worried that you got very stressed, and I didn't notice it" ○ "I know that when you are stressed you don't always trust me"
Stealing Procurement	○ You won't meet my needs ○ I feel in charge and powerful ○ I must rely on myself ○ People like you don't care about me. ○ I cannot trust or rely on adults ○ This feels exciting which helps my stress	○ Independent ○ Self-agency ○ Crafty ○ Good at reading the environment ○ Getting needs met ○ Able to make myself feel better	○ "I am worried that you got very stressed, and I didn't notice it" ○ "I wonder if you were worried about_____" ○ "When you take things, I think old feelings came up for you" ○ "I wonder if you needed to feel strong and in control of your life"

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Anger	○ You don't get it ○ You don't care about me ○ I am worried ○ I feel helpless ○ I am afraid ○ I feel threatened	○ Intense commitment to a belief ○ Wanting to feel in charge ○ Clear ○ Decisive ○ Self-advocate ○ Intense caring ○ Protesting something that feels unjust ○ Self-protection ○ Fear of rejection, abandonment	○ "You have every right to feel upset" ○ "I notice how strongly you feel about this" ○ "I want to better understand how important this is to you"
Withdrawn	○ Why bother ○ I can't do this ○ I am focused elsewhere ○ Overwhelmed ○ Overstimulated	○ Taking care of oneself ○ Accepting things as they are ○ Careful about trusting others ○ Thoughtful ○ Shy	○ "I see that you are trying to sort things out" ○ "I wonder if you are letting me know there is too much going on"