



Supporting Students

TRAINING TO DE-ESCALATE DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

JON MCGILL 2021

Trauma and Social Emotional Needs

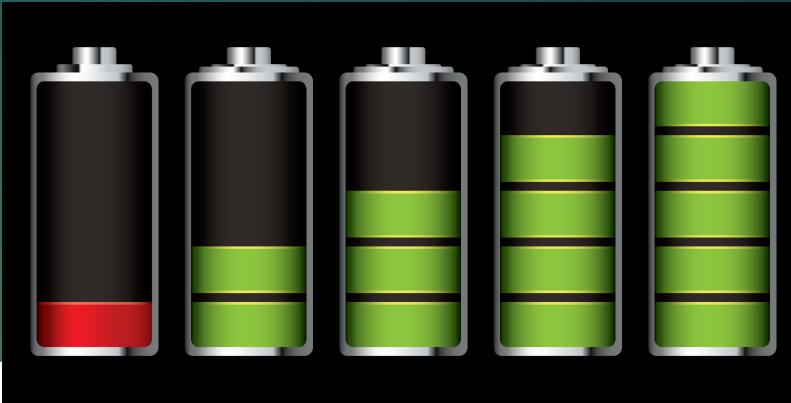
We don't really know what the long-term impact of school closures during the pandemic will be. We have some evidence about the academic gaps and we can speculate about the psychological costs of isolation, fear, loneliness and other SEL impacts. Until we establish our schools at something close to the "normal" that we once had, we won't know what to expect, except we know that we will have some new aspects of students to address, understand and support. This will take understanding and flexibility from teachers and administrators. It will also put a strain on the support services that we know are often already under stress.

Crisis Intervention




- ▶ What we really mean by “de-escalation” is intervention when things are reaching an emotional and physical peak, where student behaviors require structured interventions that each faculty member is trained to apply in safe and supportive ways.
- ▶ Much of this presentation is based on the work of the Crisis Prevention Institute and a workshop provided by Baltimore City Public Schools on 9 November, 2019.
- ▶ The CPI offers a program based on the following precepts: Care, Welfare, Safety and Security.
- ▶ This is primarily offered to you as a way to think about handling student behaviors that have reached an emotional and physical stage where directed intervention is required. This does not include physical restraint, which requires a separate level of training and licensing.

Is this all about power?



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- ▶ On some levels, yes, but if we make it only about power, we might miss the point. This is about behavior that for whatever reasons has moved into the *irrational*, the *violent*, the *aggressive* and the *uncontrolled*. This is behavior almost always about the individual but often triggered by inappropriate ways of working with people who have suffered trauma or other hurt.
 - ▶ Escalation: verbal aggression, heightened physical activity, self-harm or threats of harm, crying, verbal distress
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- ▶ We meet these by calming-giving space, preparation for the need to restrain, restraint, calming and reassurance.

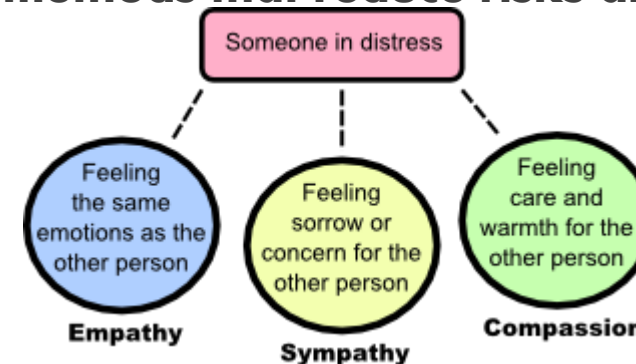
Stages

- ▶ Anxiety
 - ▶ Defensiveness
 - ▶ Risk Behavior
 - ▶ Tension Reduction
- We address these by
- ▶ Supportive Stances (physical)
 - ▶ Directives
 - ▶ Physical interventions
 - ▶ Therapeutic Rapport

Principles and Priorities

- ▶ **Our purpose is to train in approaches that prevent, decelerate, manage behaviors so as to avoid restrictive physical interventions**
- ▶ **Understand the causes of and functions of varied behaviors**
- ▶ **Use effective interpersonal skills, with verbal, non-verbal communications as well as “Empathic Listening” to influence behaviors**

- ▶ **Understand the legal, ethical and moral dimensions associated with interventions**
- ▶ **Use a consistent framework for decision making about behaviors**
- ▶ **Understand warning signs and methods that reduce risks and tensions**



Some things to think about: Definitions and Advice

- ▶ **Kinesics:** body language. The value of understanding body language, position and messaging is enormous. Body language conveys respect, attitude, next steps, intentions and outcomes
- ▶ **“paraverbal communications”-tone** not words! Hand movements, gestures, cadence, accents, volume
- ▶ **“Behavior influences behavior!”**
- ▶ **“Kids pluck nerves”** “Kids fight in schools because they want someone to save them.”
- ▶ **“Take all threats seriously.”** Document, seek assistance and advice because times have changed!



“

Decision-making involves a duty of care, focusing on the best interests of the student and others, making sure we are reasonable and proportionate in responses, using last resort, least restrictive strategies, and doing something versus doing nothing

”

RISK: WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF GOOD VERSUS BAD OUTCOMES?

Empathic listening: this is an active process to discern what is being said: it allows time to reflect, consider, assess. We use paraphrases, repetition, re-statements to support students in this process.



We don't
learn from
talking; we
learn from
listening.

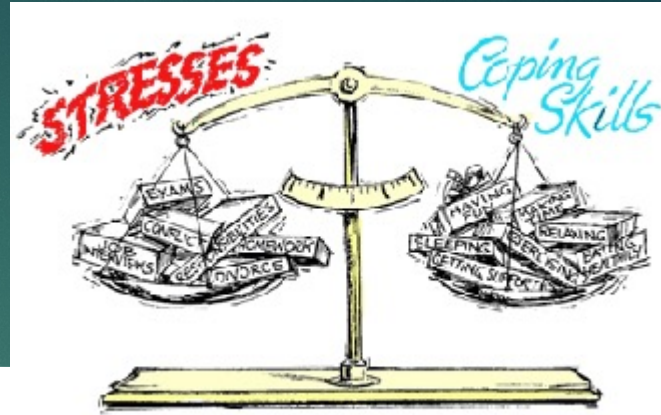
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Empathy

“Empathic listening”: this is an active process that allows us to discern what a person is saying, how and why they are saying it , what the “tone” suggests, how much reflection time is necessary.

“It’s not about you until you make it about you”

Teachers



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There is no substitute for planning for behavior issues, just as we plan for academic content.

C Care

O Obvious

P Preventive/Planning

E Effective

W Whole picture

E Essential

L Limits

L Leads to solutions

Behavior

- ▶ Verbal outbursts can simply be “venting” or signs of troubles to come.
- ▶ One key reminder is that teachers can remove either the student or the audience when outbursts occur. One or the other should happen.
- ▶ What is “non-compliance” for complex reasons and what is a “power struggle”?
- ▶ When students are intimidating? Take threats seriously, all of them! Document everything: seek advice and/or assistance right away.
- ▶ Remember: behavior influences behavior!

Levels of Behavior

- ▶ **Anxiety behavior-Level One:** increase in the level of behavior. Staff see behavior that is not typical or represents change. This is different from individual to individual but it can include change in body language, overall affect, tone, language, and other patterns. This is the stage at which new behavior is noticeable and often by more than one person
- ▶ The appropriate response to this is **support, empathy, and care**, all of which in themselves are de-escalation tactics. This approach increases the likelihood of trust which is the key component in relationships.

Level 2

Defensive Behavior Level

This is the onset of obvious loss of rational behaviors. Language may become more aggressive, offensive and insulting. It might be that students will be unable to respond to clear verbal directives. Tone of voice, cadence, body positions, non-verbal cues all become more important at this stage.

The appropriate responses involve maintenance of rationality and calm behaviors from adults. Often this stage ends up in power struggles and higher emotional levels, which are ineffective and might actually promote more irrationality, leading to violence. Irrationality gets in the way of processing complicated directives. Simple is best, such as “sit in this chair” , “come with me” , you are scaring people” , “Come with me/us so we can help you”

Level 3

Risk Behavior Level

- ▶ This level indicates a more complete loss of control leading to actual or implied violence. This level is defined as a “total loss of control”.
- ▶ Even this level requires a clear appreciation for the fact that physical restraints are a last resort, used when there is a clear danger to the student or those around him/her. There may be both moral and ethical reasons to intervene physically but the professional landscape is less clear.
- ▶ Be prepared for heightened physical resistance to being restrained, even in the most gentle way-shouting , cursing, fighting off behaviors may develop.

Tension Reduction: Level 4

- ▶ This is the point where the beginning of self control re-asserting itself becomes evident: physical restraint is usually followed by heightened activity but then by gradual calming.
- ▶ A great deal of emotional energy is expended when students are losing and lose control.
- ▶ Remember that the high degree of emotional and physical energy, and the circumstances, create trauma. That might be short-lived but it is there.

Therapeutic Support

- ▶ This is the stage when adults need to re-establish a relationship with the student. This should be a period of conversation, calm and re-direction and should include some outline of next steps.
- ▶ All behavior has purpose, even when we cannot see it or be aware of it. This includes adult behavior in the faced of emotional loss of control by students. The ways in which adults react to students have an enormous impact on what happens next! Body language, tone, posture, language, volume, all of these play a part in making for positive or negative outcomes.

The Role of Trauma

- ▶ Alarm systems in the brain kick in under threat: that is the “fight or flight” reaction.
- ▶ Young people experiencing trauma, continuous threats or the context in which threats may appear are in what is called a “chronic state of fear”, and this activates the “survival” brain, the lower and middle regions of the brain.
- ▶ The brain of a youngster that develops in the context of trauma can be overactive and more easily triggered by many external factors.
- ▶ We know that many of our students have experienced trauma (and many adults also)

Trauma Signs

- ▶ **Problem areas: Managing emotions/chronic irritability/anxiety/empathy/expressing needs/understanding contexts/understanding the impact of behavior/connecting with others/working in groups.**
- ▶ **Trauma undermines rationality**
- ▶ **Trauma “triggers” are unpredictable**
- ▶ **Student behaviors when responding to adults is often quite predictable!**

The Story of Ryan

Ryan is in 8th grade. He has witnessed severe domestic violence in his home, father beating mother, for years. One recent night, Dad injured mom severely and she had to be taken to hospital, while he was arrested. Ryan saw all of it and got little to no sleep that night.

Ryan's neighbor took him to school in the morning. Ryan's teacher, when Ryan came into the room, asked for homework and chastised him when he did not have it (She had no idea what had happened). She then demanded that he give up his free time or after school to do the work. Ryan was already very upset and being in trouble of this kind was a "trigger". A little later, Ryan's desk mate bumped him accidentally and Ryan punched the other student. The teacher began to yell at Ryan to stop which further escalated the emotional outburst: soon, desk and chairs were kicked and Ryan began to scream and curse. He then hid under a desk.

Ryan's Story (2)

After ten minutes, Ryan was persuaded to emerge from the area under the desk. He was taken to the Principal, who decided that a five-day suspension was in order, thus sending Ryan back to the environment that was the source of trauma, not to mention the loss of instructional time and the fact that school was his safe place.

What are the alternatives?

Trauma: the wider context for behavior

Trauma signs include the following:

- ▶ **Difficulty managing emotions**
- ▶ **Chronic irritability**
- ▶ **Showing empathy**
- ▶ **Expressing needs in words**
- ▶ **Understanding contexts**
- ▶ **Understanding how behavior affects others?**
- ▶ **Working in groups/connecting with others**

MSDE Says.....

What advice does the State Department of Education give on physical restraint? The school district? The Teachers' Union? How about advice about "breaking up fights"?

The Law

- ▶ **“Physical Restraint:** A personal restriction that immobilizes or reduces the ability of a student to move the student’s torso, arms, legs or head freely. Physical restraint does not include: (1) briefly holding a student to calm or comfort the student; (2) a physical escort, which is the temporary touching or holding of the hand, wrist, arm, shoulder or back for the purposes of inducing a student who is acting out to walk to a safe location; (3) moving a disruptive student who is unwilling to leave the area if other methods such as counselling have been unsuccessful; or (4) intervening in a fight in accordance with Education Article 7-307, Annotated Code of Maryland.” **COMAR 13A.08.04 Student Behavior Interventions**
- ▶ **Note that “emergency situations are those in which there is the danger of “imminent physical harm”.**
- ▶ **All of us in schools are “mandatory reporters” which means state law requires us to report any suspicions of abuse, harm or neglect. Many districts and schools have policies that ask teachers to inform school leadership about such issues prior to or when a report is made.**