

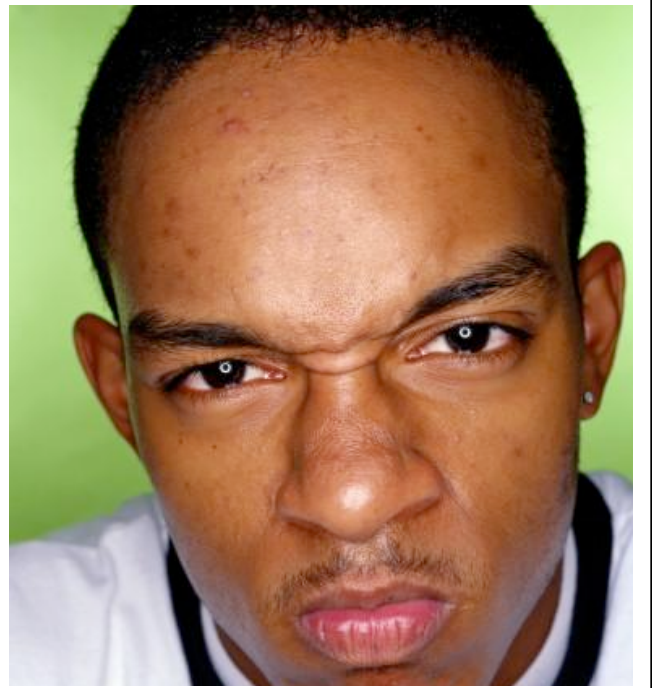
“Connecting with Troubled Youth in the Classroom”

Insights for teachers and counselors of students with special needs.

SUMMARY: As educators of challenging youth, we are often called upon to respond to problems we find confusing, overwhelming, or upsetting. Faced with issues we do not fully understand, it can be easy to overreact with punitive consequences, and end up rejecting our most difficult students rather than correcting their inappropriate behaviors. However, when armed with deeper insights and greater skills, sensitive educators can make powerful break-throughs and more effectively reach and teach the students who most need our help.

This article will briefly explain some of the self-defeating dynamics common to at-risk children and youth, then share a number of insights needed to remain professional and therapeutic in challenging classroom situations.

For more information about training in this topic, visit www.TACT2.com or contact the author at SBParese@aol.com.



The Impact of Early Childhood

The impact of a child's first 5-6 years on his/her classroom performance cannot be overstated. Under normal, healthy conditions, infants learn that their parents can be trusted to nurture and console them, that adults will respond to their needs calmly and safely. Toddlers learn to explore and try new things, that they can recover from mistakes without pain or shame. Young children learn limits and boundaries, coming to value adult approval more than they fear punishment. (Erikson, 1950).

When children experience this kind of firm but patient guidance at home, they often respond well to the structure of the classroom. They are ready to succeed in school and motivated to learn from their teachers.

However, when young children experience fear, shame and harsh punishment in response to their mistakes, they often develop serious emotional issues. Some succeed in school anyway, enjoying the dependability, structure and approval that is lacking at home. Many others bring their mistrust to school with them

(Patterson, De Baryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), subconsciously expecting that their teachers and classmates will be as harsh, negligent or unpredictable as their caretakers and siblings at home.

Because on some subconscious level they believe that “Predictable failure seems better than unpredictable success,” these children often create self-fulfilling prophecies of rejection. Though their styles vary -- anxious or angry, withdrawn or whiny -- their goal remains the same: to hurt and reject teachers and administrators before we get the opportunity to hurt and reject them.

The Joy and Pain of Teaching

Most educators teach because we enjoy sharing our passion and knowledge with eager students. There is something immensely rewarding about delivering a well-planned lesson and watching children master new concepts, knowing that we are shaping new minds, influencing a new generation.

At the same time, there is something immensely infuriating about delivering that same well-planned lesson to children and youth who are distracted, disruptive, and even disrespectful to us. We sometimes fail to see that these children may be covering up their own fears, anger, and inadequacies by acting out in self-defeating ways.

They become anxious and withdraw when faced with challenging assignments because on some level, they expect to be humiliated. They yell or threaten when facing stern adults or inflexible standards because on some level, they expect to be intimidated. They predict failure when dealing with stressful classroom circumstances, then subconsciously act out in ways that insure they will indeed fail. (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001).

Strategies that Work

When educators are fully aware of this dynamic, we are often able to respond professionally and therapeutically. We patiently state expectations and quietly set limits. We de-escalate tensions and restructure tasks so that our students can experience success. And when we must remove them, we do so calmly, creating opportunities to resolve problems and re-enter the classroom later.



But when we get caught up in our own frustration and helplessness, we may react punitively to students' self-defeating surface behaviors rather than responding professionally to their underlying issues. Instead of providing a safe, structured nurturing learning environment which teaches "It is okay to make and learn from your mistakes in my classroom," we may inadvertently find ourselves recreating the same dynamics of negligence, shame, and ridicule which reinforces the lessons they learned in early childhood at home: "Adults are unsafe and unpredictable; you cannot trust anyone."

How do we build healthy relationships with relationship-wary children while also maintaining classroom discipline and instruction?

1. CLEAR EXPECTATIONS:

Provide clear, reasonable expectations of behavior. Troubled students often misinterpret or manipulate vague or unspoken guidelines, so be clear about rules and their consequences. Use teachable moments to help difficult students develop the self-control and self-awareness to follow those rules. When applying consequences, do so calmly, without ridicule or shaming.

2. REASONABLE CLASSWORK:

Be sure that classroom and homework assignments are challenging, but not too difficult. Troubled students often sabotage themselves or others if they believe they cannot succeed, so be sure that assigned work is within their abilities. Provide additional support if needed, but never do for a student -- do with him/her instead.

3. CALM DE-ESCALATION:

Help anxious or angry students calm down and save face when they are upset. Troubled youth often make small problems into big problems because they have difficulty managing stress, or because they are embarrassed in front of their peers. Be calm and understanding when students are worked up, and avoid confronting them in public if possible.

4. SHOW CARE & CONCERN:

Offer unexpected encouragement and approval when students are doing well. Troubled youth often expect attention only when they are making mistakes. Instead, build relationships during non-crisis moments by looking for opportunities to compliment their work, encourage their efforts, recognize their accomplishments, and empathize with their troubles.



Closing

Dr. James Comer once said, “No significant intervention takes place without a significant relationship.”

Education is an intervention designed to help students develop the knowledge and skills needed to become well-balanced, self-sustaining, contributing adults. Effective instruction relies on respectful teacher-student relationships, but this can be exceptionally challenging with at-risk students who have come to expect failure rather than success.

Dr. Haim Ginnott (1995), famed child psychologist and teacher wrote these inspirational words, a mission statement for all of us who work with challenging youth and sometimes fear we may be making a difference:

“I’ve come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized.”

References

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