

Tenet #4: To the Hammer, Everything Looks Like a Nail.

The Deeper Cut:

This statement, sometimes attributed to Dr. Abraham Maslow, recalls the need for different tools to manage different situations.

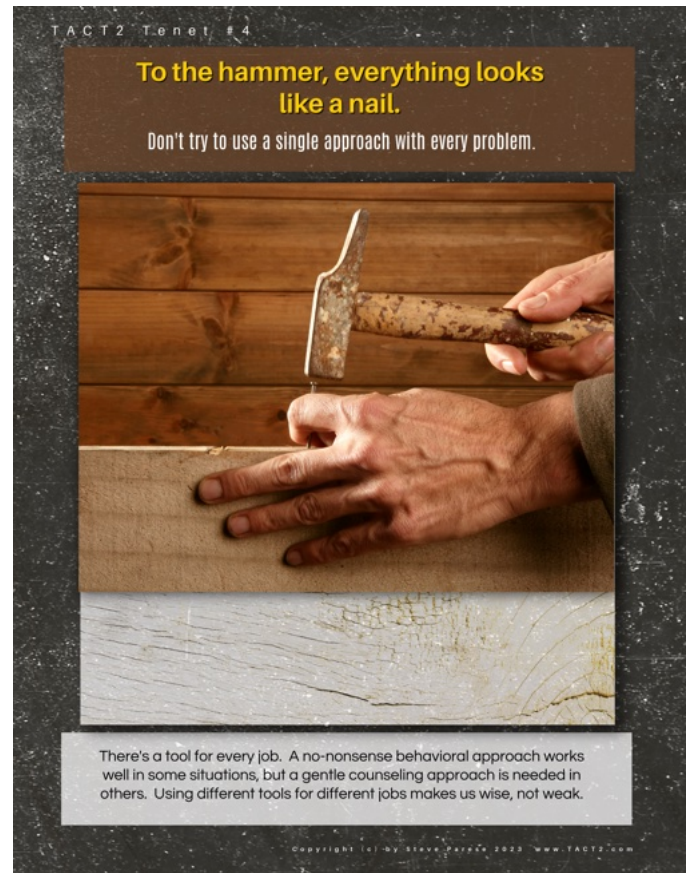
It can be tempting for adults to adopt a single approach to dealing with kids and their issues, and to apply that approach to every situation. Those of us raised in no-nonsense homes or trained in strict behavioral approaches may believe that consistent consequences are the only way to teach kids to respect adults and follow rules.

Others, raised in child-centered homes or educated in therapeutic approaches, may try to build caring relationships, hoping to inspire positive change. A third group, drawing from their own histories or training, may focus more on addressing mental illness, addiction, or trauma issues before all else.

Each of these perspectives can be helpful in some situations. However, the problems kids experience are too varied to be explained by any one theory, and too complex to be managed with a single tool. It's like trying to build a deck with nothing but a hammer.

Deliberate Misbehavior

Some problems are deliberate or intentional, such as bullying a peer to feel powerful, or skipping school to avoid a boring class. Dr. William Glasser, founder of Reality Therapy, observed that all individuals have the same basic social needs, although we have often learned different ways to meet them. Glasser's social needs include:



1. Love/belonging (a need to be accepted and valued by others);
2. Power/importance (a need to have influence and significance);
3. Fun/pleasure (a need for social and physical enjoyment); and
4. Freedom/choice (a need for independence and self-determination).

This approach suggests that youth deliberately misbehave because it meets one of more of these needs, even though it may be at the expense of others' rights or even the youth's own long-term well-being. They are thinking clearly and reasonably calm, using a pattern of behavior that's worked for them in the past. They've done the math and decided that the immediate pleasure of getting high or the instant satisfaction of peer approval is worth the risk of punishment later.

When intervening in deliberate situations, our focus should be on correcting their behavior. Catch them early if possible, and use a no-nonsense tone of voice to remind them of our expectations. Or failing that, catch them during a problem, and enforce the rules with firm, fair, and consistent consequences. Give deliberate kids clear expectations and outcomes, and they may rethink their misbehaviors.

Emotional Misbehavior

A second type of problem is driven by emotional crisis, such as exploding at a teacher after being bullied in the hall, or refusing to participate in class out of embarrassment over a disability. Dr. Nicholas Long, creator of the Conflict Cycle, suggested that children with a history of abuse, neglect, and other significant adversities often become highly sensitized to emotional or physical threats. When triggered, they overreact and behave in self-defeating ways.

Long's work suggests that kids who misbehave emotionally are often unable to think rationally and are simply reacting to a stressful situation. They are in emotional survival mode, acting out of desperation not deliberation.

When intervening in emotional situations, our focus should be on calming the underlying emotions, not on addressing surface behaviors right away. Use a gentle tone and calm body language to offer reassurance, and follow up with active listening skills to help them vent. Give emotional kids a safe

environment and calm response, and they may grow less sensitized to the issues that trigger them.

Summary: Just as a carpenter must master more than one tool to complete a woodworking project, child care professionals must use more than one set of skills to address behavior problems. As caring adults, we must adapt our strategies to the needs of the child, rather than forcing square pegs into round holes.

So when kids are acting up deliberately, focus on correcting their behavior. Remind them of rules and expectations, and be ready to enforce that with consequences if needed.

But when kids are acting out because of underlying emotional issues, de-escalating the emotional storm is more important than confronting surface behaviors. Provide calm reassurance and create safe opportunities for venting. Behavioral accountability is important, but only after the storm passes.

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