

Tenet #3: Bring Calm to the Crazy.

The Deeper Cut:

Dr. Haim Ginott, teacher, psychologist, and parent educator, wrote in his book Between Parent and Child:

"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. 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 or a child humanized or dehumanized."

Ginott's passage reminds us of the incredible impact parents, teachers, and other adults have upon the emotional well-being of children. He emphasized the importance of recognizing children's feelings and validating their worth, even if we must correct their behavior.


When They Bring the "Crazy"

All kids have problems from time to time. Trauma-exposed kids, living with daily abuse, neglect, or dysfunction, often have MORE: more intense, more frequent, and more enduring problems. And if they do not have safe outlets at home, they bring their "crazy," their angst and anger, into your home or classroom, where it is safer to unload. Lucky you, right?

When triggered by an unkind comment or unexpected event, some trauma-exposed kids externalize their feelings. Their overwhelming emotions explode outward, manifesting as angry aggression. They threaten, yell, curse, and

TACT2 Tenet #3

Bring calm to the crazy.
Don't underestimate the impact of your presence during crisis.



Remember that YOU are often the decisive factor in a conflict. Your attitude and actions directly impact whether today's problem becomes a full-blown crisis or an opportunity for learning. Bring your sense of poise and quiet confidence to every situation.

Copyright © by Steve Parese, Ed.D. www.TACT2.com

intimidate peers. They defy, challenge, and dare adults. They push, shove, and break things.

Many others internalize emotions, corkscrewing them inward instead, where they manifest as deep anxiety or hopeless withdrawal. The anxious ones become extremely needy, demand help, whine, cry, and regress into immaturity. The depressed ones withdraw, avoid, isolate, shut down, or try to escape.

Though it may seem like adults have no control, so much of the outcome depends upon what we do in the opening moments of a crisis. In fact, we are often the ONLY source of clear rationality. What we do MATTERS.

We Bring the Calm

Years ago, I was traveling on an airplane when the pilot announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be experiencing some mild turbulence." Seconds later, the plane bucked several times.

I heard my seat mate gasp, her hands in a white knuckle grip on the arm rests. She looked at me and groaned, "How can you be so calm when it feels like we're about to crash?"

"I look at the flight attendants," I replied. "They've been on thousands of flights, and been through lots of storms. Right now they're chatting away, laughing with passengers. If they started looking scared, then I'd know it's time for me to panic. I figure that as long as they're calm, I've got nothing to worry about."

What do you bring to an unexpected crisis? Are you bringing calm or adding to the crazy? Children often look to us when deciding how to respond to a stressful situation. They judge our capability by interpreting three broad categories of verbal and non-verbal communication.

1. Facial expressions and body language.

Are you wearing a neutral smile or an angry frown? Are you offering eye contact or avoiding it? Are your feet solidly placed, or shifting from side to side? Each of these can communicate a sense of calm competency or uncertain urgency, and will impact the way that youth respond during a stressful situation.

2. Tone of voice. Is your voice quavering, your pitch high, or your rate of speech too fast? This combination communicates anxiety, and may create insecurity during a crisis. Instead, lower your pitch and steady your voice. Keep your volume strong, and your rate of speech measured. These suggest confidence, and will reassure youth.

3. Choice of words. Finally, choose your words carefully. In an individual situation, begin with acknowledgement and reassurance: "Jamie, I can see you're upset. I'm here to help."

In a group situation, address everyone in a louder voice, with a clear directive: "Kids, listen up. We've got this now. Go back to your classrooms."

And to state the obvious, avoid profanity and useless rhetoric, such as "What the hell is going on here? Have you lost your minds?" The shock value isn't worth turning up the temperature.

Note: Kids feel reassured when they receive consistent verbal and non-verbal messages. When our words say, "No, I'm not mad at you," our facial expressions and tone of voice must suggest understanding and forgiveness, not angry retribution. Mixed messages are confusing, and can increase stress, anger, and anxiety.

Summary: In a crisis, we are often the sole source of calm rationality. What we do and say in moments of uncertainty can make all the difference in the world. When approaching a situation, take a deep breath and compose yourself. Stand firmly and confidently, using a pleasant expression and non-threatening gestures. Nod frequently in empathy when possible. Pitch your voice and volume to be clear, low, and deliberate. And avoid sarcastic questions. Instead, acknowledge feelings and offer help whenever possible.

Dr. Steve Parese is a former special educator, crisis counselor, and university faculty member, currently an international speaker and trainer. He is the author of the crisis intervention program "Therapeutic Aggression Control Techniques" (TACT2), in use since 1997 with thousands of staff around the nation. For more information, please connect by email at SBParese@aol.com, or visit the website at <https://www.tact2.com>.