

Tenet #2: BRING CALM TO THE CRAZY

The Deeper Cut:

This statement, paraphrasing Dr. Haim Ginott, reminds us of the incredible impact adults have upon the emotional and physical well-being of the children and teens in our care.

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. 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 allow stress to flow outward, manifesting as angry aggression. Many others push stress inward instead, and issues manifest as deep anxiety or hopeless withdrawal.

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.

Picture a pot of steaming water on the stove, flames licking the bottom. Tiny bubbles have formed, and the water is only seconds from boiling. Regardless of who put it on, unless YOU do something in the next few moments, the water will boil over and scald everyone close by. Though your hands are full, you take the time to turn down the heat.

What attitude and actions do you typically bring to an unexpected crisis? What messages you offer? Does your approach often turn the heat up or down? Seminal research from the 1970's suggests that people decode our meaning 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 your hands and shoulders tense or relaxed? Are you offering or avoiding eye contact? Are your feet solidly placed, or shifting from side to side? Each of these can communicate a sense of calm competency versus uncertainty urgency, and will impact the way that youth respond during the stressful situation.

2. **Tone of voice.** Is your voice quavering and your pitch a bit high, your volume too soft, and rate of speech overly fast? This combination suggests anxiety, and may create insecurity during a crisis. Or is your voice steady and pitched lower, 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 crisis, address everyone in a louder voice, with a clear directive: "Kids, listen up. We've got this now. Go back to your classrooms." And though it seems obvious, always avoid profanity and rhetoric: "What the hell is going on here? Have you lost your minds?" The shock value isn't worth turning up the temperature.

Side 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 your verbal and non-verbal message. Stand firmly and confidently, using 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.

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