Returning to School in the Era of COVID-19

Public and private schools are quickly moving to reopen their doors in the midst of a pandemic, and serious behavior issues are sure to occur. What can educators do to avoid predictable problems, and safely manage the rest? This article will offer strategies from the fields of behavior management and trauma-informed care to deal with the challenging months ahead. *2.3.2021*

Introduction

There is a great deal of trepidation as our public and private schools begin to reopen while the nation is still in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Great efforts have been made to limit exposure to COVID-19 in classrooms and hallways, and to prevent it from spreading to local communities. *But even if we can keep students from infection, how will educators deal with the emotional and behavioral effects of the past year, especially on those students with significant learning issues?* This article will offer valuable insights and practical, trauma-sensitive strategies to address this question.

Feeling safe and secure

Few would argue that the primary purpose of schooling is to offer students the knowledge and skills needed to become responsible, self-supporting citizens. And clearly, a physically and emotionally safe learning environment is a necessary condition for effective education. Students and staff must not only BE safe (from physical assault, intimidation or ridicule, infectious diseases), they must also FEEL safe. They must believe that those in authority will plan proactively for their well-being, watch attentively for early signs of problems, intervene calmly when there are concerns, and act decisively in dangerous situations. Before they can engage in learning history, science, or mathematics, they must feel completely certain that everyone — from kitchen staff to the school administrator — is dedicated to keeping them safe and secure.

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Adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic

This is doubly true for students or staff who have experienced a great deal of adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic. A short list of such conditions might include:

- Debilitating personal illness or health conditions
- Illness or death of friends or family
- Insufficient food, clothing, or shelter due to lost family income
- Stress from recent racial, societal or political upheavals
- Active abuse or neglect from overwhelmed caretakers
- Lengthy exposure to others' addiction, mental illness, or criminality

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- Shortage of medications or emotional support during isolation
- Separation from close peers or family members
- Loss of comfortable daily routines

Exactly how damaging are these conditions? The impact of adversity depends first on the *frequency, intensity and duration of exposure*. For example, with time and support, one may recover from the death of a parent or grandparent. But when we must also deal with a dramatic drop in monthly income, an ADHD child or sibling at home 24/7, and the alcoholic uncle who has recently moved in… full recovery seems far less certain.

The impact of adversity also depends upon the *presence or lack of positive resiliency factors,* such as physical health, mental wellness, and supportive relationships. When children or staff have experienced prior trauma, or when they struggle with ongoing health issues such as diabetes or depression, their ability to bounce back from COVID-19 related adversity suffers. When also isolated from support networks of friends, family, and school, these individuals are at much greater risk of negative long- and short-term outcomes.

The role of school in recovery

Will our schools ameliorate or exacerbate these problems? As our children return to a traditional brick-and-mortar education, many policy-makers will be focused on immediately addressing academic deficits. It will be tempting to quickly return to a rigorous and demanding instructional schedule, to press students to work harder than ever to recover forgotten knowledge and prepare for year-end tests.

Yet it seems likely that few children, much less those with learning disabilities or behavioral health issues, will return "school-ready" on day one. Nor will all educators, many of whom have experienced their own losses during the pandemic, be completely ready to provide the supportive learning environment their students need. Not without help.

As schools plan to re-open their doors, it is essential to plan not only for COVID-19 safety, but for emotional security as well.

Therefore, as schools plan to re-open their doors in the coming weeks, it is essential to plan not only for COVID-19 safety (face masks, social distancing, hand-cleaning) but for emotional security as well.

As they return to their classrooms, our students will be carrying exceptionally large emotional backpacks, filled with anxiety and anger, with disobedience and disruption. And line staff, carrying their own emotional burdens, will need exceptional support from colleagues and administrators if they are to meet this challenge.

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Predictable adjustment problems

What emotional and behavioral challenges should we expect as students return to school? How should we prepare for and respond to these predictable problems? The rest of this article is dedicated to answering these questions, using the framework of the Therapeutic Aggression Control Techniques (TACT2) model.

The TACT2 model suggests that during crisis situations, decisions should be made by first assessing the immediacy of danger, then the psychological source of the problem. Immediately dangerous situations require a crisis response, with the goal of creating safety and security. Non-dangerous, deliberately-motivated problems often respond best to behavioral interventions designed to quickly correct misbehavior. However, emotionally-fueled issues must be de-escalated first, and respond better to counseling interventions.

After a year of isolation from their classmates, many students will be far more interested in socializing with peers than engaging in "boring" academic tasks.

As students return to our schools, we will see all three types of behavior problems — deliberate, emotional, and dangerous — as a result of pandemic isolation.

1. Some problems will be DELIBERATE

What are deliberate problems? Deliberate, intentional misbehavior often meets a student's social needs. Dr. William Glasser identified four categories of social needs: love/belonging, power/importance, fun/pleasure, and freedom/individuality. After a year of isolation from their classmates, many students will be far more interested in socializing with peers and having fun than engaging in "boring" academic tasks.

Examples of deliberate misbehavior:

- Students who ignore work in favor of chatting with peers (need for belonging).
- Students who arrive late or wander halls between classes despite numerous reminders (need for freedom).
- Students who behave in pseudo-dangerous ways, such as pretending to spit or sneeze on others to get a laugh (need for fun) or to shock staff (need for power).
- Students who defy social distancing guidelines to bond with friends (need for belonging) or enjoy romantic relationships (need for pleasure).

Helpful corrective responses. As adults, we understand the excitement of returning to school after so long away, yet we cannot simply ignore these distractions and disruptions, especially when they become risky. How should we respond to these behaviors without overreacting?

The following corrective strategies will help schools ease students back into the routines and expectations of an academic setting and minimize deliberate misbehaviors.

- **Re-establish rules and routines from day one,** but be patient with minor problems during the first few weeks. Provide consistent supervision and constant reminders, but avoid serious consequences if possible. Understand that many misbehaviors are in response to NORMAL social needs.
- **Provide approved needs-fulfilling alternatives.** Students are less likely to act inappropriately to meet needs when we offer other, more appropriate means of doing so. For example, meet social needs for belonging and fun by allowing 10 minutes of social time at the end of a productive class, or by integrating fun activities into academics.

- **Shape positive behavior by rewarding positive choices.** Not only is positive reinforcement often far more effective, but it avoids the "acting out to get attention" phenomenon that all teachers recognize. Use intrinsic motivators that build self-pride ('I'm really proud of you for working so hard') instead of strictly extrinsic rewards ('Here are your points for doing your work'). Reinforce good decision making ('You made a choice just now') rather than simple compliance ('You followed the rules').
- **Stay calm when enforcing rules.** Irritation is understandable when students ignore rules or disrupt others, but expressing anger toward students is almost always counter-productive. The misbehaving ones get the satisfaction of knowing they've pushed our buttons, and others may actually feel frightened. Instead, adopt a business-like attitude that suggests: "I really don't want to be the bad guy, but I'll do it if I have to." Leave your own feelings of aggravation or impatience out of your voice and posture when warning about or giving reasonable consequences.

Because of underlying insecurities, youth who have recently experienced loss may act out heightened feelings of anger, anxiety, or sadness.

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2. Many problems will be EMOTIONAL

What are emotional problems? Emotional misbehavior is an impulsive response to overwhelming stress, low self-esteem, or prior trauma. According to Dr. Nicholas Long, students who are under great stress at home or who have recently experienced losses may be triggered by something as minor as a funny look from peers, a mild correction from staff, or an ambiguous comment in a text. Because of their underlying insecurities, these youth may act out heightened feelings of anger, anxiety, or sadness in an impulsive way, leading to negative reactions and even greater stress. This spiraling cycle can be far more intense for youth with a history of trauma or mental health issues.

Examples of overwhelming emotional worries:

- Anxiety about physical changes and social acceptance after a year away from peers ('Will they make fun of me? Will they still like me?')
- Anxiety about unfamiliar academic tasks ('I don't know this stuff! I'm not used to doing this anymore.')
- Anxiety about COVID-19 ('Will I get infected/sick? Will others treat me like an outcast because I got COVID recently?')
- Anxiety about stressful home issues, including parents or family members who are financially, mentally, or physically unwell ('Are they going to be okay?')
- Anxiety or shame about abuse or neglect that took place during COVID isolation ('Should I tell anyone, or keep my secrets?')
- Grief about family illness or losses during COVID ('How can I act normal when my grandmother just died?')
- Strong feelings, including rage, confusion, helplessness, sadness, over recent socio-political events. ('School doesn't matter when THIS stuff is happening!')
- General lack of trust in school and teachers as a dependable source of nurturance, support, regularity, etc. ('What if they close school again just when I got used to it?')

Helpful counseling responses. Students experiencing an "emotional fever" seldom respond well to demands to "just get better, dammit!" Behavioral problems that are rooted in emotional insecurities require a calm, cooling response instead of ultimatums and consequences.

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The following trauma-sensitive counseling strategies will help schools create emotionally and physically safe learning environments that will minimize stress-fueled crises.

- **Be warm and welcoming.** Be sure that all students (especially those with significant insecurities) feel safe and welcomed. Offer big smiles of greeting, call students by name, and create a school and classroom environment that feels like it is THEIRS. Help students feel valued and safe with us.
- **Explain values-based expectations.** Students abide by rules more often when they are clearly stated, especially when they have had a voice in creating them. Get their input to establish expectations and ask for their help in creating visual posters. Make sure everyone knows what is okay and not. Keep expectations simple, value-driven, and positively stated ('Be safe and considerate by keeping your distance' *rather than* 'Don't get in someone's face'). Be consistent but gentle when enforcing them, especially with highly emotional children.

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- **Establish predictable routines.** Children and youth feel safer when they know what to expect. Establish and post daily routines, thereby creating a sense of predictability in the midst of internal chaos. Give advance warning when routines must be changed, even temporarily.
- **Pay attention.** Most emotional accidents show clear warning signs, if we take the time to watch for them. Notice when students seem to be acting out their difficulties by externalizing (e.g., angry grumbling) or internalizing (e.g., anxious fidgeting or sad shutdowns). Decode these warning signs and quietly offer help ('You look like something's bothering you. What can I do to help?').
- **Be patient.** Emotional children and adolescents, especially those with learning difficulties, often experience a state of confused mental chaos. They have difficulty organizing themselves, or making sense of complicated information. In a patient, non-judgmental way, quietly restate your directions, or re-explain tasks in a new way. Help students understand what is needed, and give them time to adjust without the pressure of ultimatums.
- **Teach coping skills.** Overwhelmed students act out in part because they lack the social emotional strategies needed to respond productively to stressful circumstances. They may need help learning new skills such as self-regulation, communication, teamwork, and problem solving. These can be taught directly as a group, or integrated into assignments.
- **Reinforce baby-steps.** Trauma-exposed youth are often overly critically of themselves when they make mistakes, then act out defensively. Offer genuine praise and encouragement when students move in the right direction, even if it's only minor progress. ('Today, you held it together a LOT longer than you did yesterday. I'm proud of your self-control.') Use intrinsic motivators (pride) instead of extrinsic (points), or at least combine the two.

3. A few problems will be DANGEROUS

Which problems are dangerous? Dangerous behavior puts the acting out student, other youth, or staff at risk of serious harm. Traditionally, "immediate danger" most often means violence toward others or attempts to harm oneself. But in the era of COVID-19, actions which cause others to be exposed to infection may also be considered immediately dangerous, especially when a large group is exposed by a symptomatic individual.

Dangerous and deliberate. Some dangerous behaviors may begin as deliberate actions. Examples might include:

- Student who plans to assault another (or to spit on / sneeze on another) as payback for perceived disrespect.

- Student who removes his mask while in close contact with others to gain power over peers, or to relieve the boredom of an academic task.
- Student who intentionally yanks the mask off of a staff member who is trying to redirect her.

Dangerous and emotional. Some dangerous behaviors may stem from emotional issues instead. Examples include:

- Student who assaults another in a rage after being spit on or coughed on.
- Student who removes his/her mask during an asthma attack or panic attack.
- Student who overreacts to failure at a difficult task with self-abuse or aggressive accusations toward others.
- Students who experiences unusually high stress at home and enters school looking for a fight, running wildly, or hiding in a dangerous place.
- Student whose prior trauma or self-esteem issues are triggered, then quickly escalates to harming others out of anger, or to ignoring safety guidelines out of self-loathing.

When behaviors are imminently dangerous, staff must promote physical and emotional safety with creating greater risk.

Helpful crisis responses. When behaviors are imminently dangerous, staff must respond in a way that promotes physical safety — without increasing the danger or creating greater risk.

Proactive prevention strategies include:

- **Be clear and consistent.** Be sure that students are absolutely clear about what is considered safe or unsafe, and know exactly what the consequences will be if safety guidelines are violated. Enforce the rules consistently, but not rigidly; allow for discretion on a case by case basis.

- **Identify and monitor high risk students**, especially those with a history of aggressive or self-injurious behaviors in previous years. Speak individually with these students, and create a behavior plan around their safety.
- **Monitor high risk times and locations,** especially arrival, dismissal, and transitions between classes. Maintain a strong and vocal staff presence during these times, and in locations such as stairwells and bathrooms when youth may be unsupervised.

- **Learn about students' home lives,** and provide proactive emotional support to those who have experienced loss or are living in high stress. Establish mentor relationships and provide regular emotional check-ins with these students.

Reactive intervention strategies include:

- **Approach potentially dangerous situations in support mode.** "Bring calm to the crazy" by offering a reassuring presence rather than a domineering one.
- **Adopt a policy of "Contain, don't restrain."** Do everything possible to move the dangerous student to a safer environment using objects (such as cushions as shields) or obstacles (such as closed doors). Focus on shuttling the student toward safety rather than immediately using hands-on.
- **Use monitored safety rooms instead of lengthy restraints** for students who are unable to calm themselves down.
- **Follow-up dangerous incidents,** especially those placing others at risk of infection, with thorough health checks ('How serious was the exposure?'), deep debriefing ('What could we have done differently?'), and strong corrective measures ('What needs to happen next?'), including removal from the school environment or use of law enforcement.

Closing

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be understood. In addition to the grief of so many lost lives, Americans have experienced health challenges, economic problems, social isolation, political upheaval, civil unrest, and a kind of existential insecurity. The impact of this on children is greatly magnified, especially for those who lack predictability, safety, and security at home.

As students return more fully to school in the coming weeks and months, educators are likely to see serious acting-out behaviors. While some will certainly be deliberate in nature, many more will stem from students' emotional insecurities and adversities. Knowing this, schools must avoid adopting so blunt a tool as a rigid "Zero Tolerance" policy for disruptive behavior.

Instead, we must plan for not only physically safe classrooms and hallways, but for emotionally secure learning environments as well. The trauma-sensitive strategies outlined here will go a long way toward providing the measured and therapeutic response to crisis our children deserve.

Dr. Steve Parese is a former crisis counselor, special education teacher, and university faculty member. He is the author of Therapeutic Aggression Control Techniques (TACT2) and Therapeutic Behavior Management (TBM), crisis intervention programs in use across the nation.

For more information about this content, or for dynamic training in TACT2/TBM, contact the author at SBParese@aol.com or visit the website www.TACT2.com.