Positive relationships

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> "We encourage you to have clear, consistent rules and parameters and fair, meaningful consequences. But above all, be strong role models for your students and form positive, caring relationships."
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> – Mark Boynton and Christine Boynton, *The Educator's Guide to Preventing and Solving Discipline Problems*

The development of positive, caring relationships is important for all students and is crucial for students with behaviour disabilities. These students often feel isolated and disconnected from others, both at home and at school. They will need many opportunities and intensive support and coaching in order to develop the social skills needed for successful relationships with both peers and adults.

Teacher–student relationships

Having at least one significant relationship with a positive role model can make a significant difference in the life of any student, but this is especially true for the student who has behaviour disabilities. A positive relationship with the teacher can also be a model for other students, and can help foster a student's sense of belonging to the school community.

Sample strategies for developing positive teacher-student relationships

- *Be positive.*
  Intentionally give individual students positive feedback at least four times for every one time you give negative or corrective feedback.
- *Identify each student's genuine strengths and interests.*
  Make it your goal to identify at least five positive qualities or characteristics for any student with behaviour disabilities in your classroom. For example, reads well, helps younger students, has a sense of humour, has musical skills and is a leader. Then let the student know that you recognize these qualities. One way of doing this could be to identify a different quality with the student each Monday and then look for opportunities throughout the week to highlight and reinforce behaviours that demonstrate this quality.

- *Tell other adults and students in the school about individual students' positive qualities.*
  Too often, staff only hear the problem behaviours of students who have behaviour disabilities. Look for opportunities to share good news about these students.
- *Create opportunities for students to be helpers and leaders in the classroom.*
  Look for ways to capitalize on one or more of their individual strengths or interests.
- *As much as possible, refrain from criticizing students in front of their classmates.*
  Even though you avoid using labels, the student and others in the room who hear the criticism may internalize an implicit label. For example, if a teacher says publicly, "Keep your focus; you're tuning out," the student and his or her peers may begin to believe he or she is incapable of paying attention or may label himself or herself as having an attention problem.

Use hopeful and respectful language

Words are powerful tools for shaping ideas, perceptions and attitudes. Because the kinds of words you use are so important, ensure your choice of language is positive and professional when talking *with* and *about* students who have behaviour disabilities.

Choosing your words thoughtfully when sharing information about these students can be instrumental in overcoming negative attitudes and in shaping more positive ones. Hopeful and respectful language also demonstrates a sensitivity and awareness of the feelings and comfort level of these students and their families.

- *People first, then the behaviour or the disability.*
  The words "behaviour disabilities" are adjectives, not nouns. Use terms such as "a student who has behaviour disabilities" rather than a "behaviour-disordered student." It is never acceptable to refer to an individual student or group of students as "the behaviour disordered" or by their special education code.
- *Acknowledge the diversity of students who have behaviour disabilities.*
  There is a wide range of variance in the characteristics, strengths, needs and life circumstances of students with behaviour disabilities. Avoid language that encourages stereotypes such as "*All* students with behaviour disabilities …"
- *Be objective and nonjudgemental.*
  When talking about students with behaviour disabilities, choose words that are nonjudgemental, nonemotional and are accurate descriptions. Focus on facts rather than perceptions. Avoid words and images designed to evoke pity or guilt such as "impaired by" or "handicapped."

Look after yourself[1]

Working with students with behaviour disabilities can be emotionally demanding of school staff. Self-awareness is a key component for managing stress. By taking proactive steps to increase their own self-awareness, staff who work with students with behaviour disabilities can:

- build more positive relations with students
- minimize power struggles
- enhance their effectiveness.

Increased self-awareness involves a more accurate understanding of how students affect our own emotional processes and behaviours, and how we affect students, as well. Our development as teachers depends on our willingness to take risks and regularly ask ourselves which of our own behaviours are helping or hindering our professional growth.

Recognize your own triggers

Although school staff need to learn how to recognize signs of emotional stress in their students, it is equally important to acknowledge that staff's own personalities and experiences have helped shape their attitudes and responses to certain behaviours.

Working with students who are in emotional turmoil can be stressful. Consistently responding in a calm and professional manner takes conscious effort. School staff who are aware of their own emotional triggers are more likely to minimize the frequency and intensity of counterproductive power struggles.

Use positive reinforcement

Most school staff recognize the power and necessity of using positive reinforcement. By consciously noticing and reinforcing positive behaviour, the classroom becomes a more positive environment. However, teachers who work with students with behaviour disabilities can become so attuned to problem behaviours, they inadvertently neglect to recognize and build on positive behaviours and strengths. Systematically self-monitoring your own use of praise will increase the likelihood that you will use praise and encouragement more consistently and frequently. A number of research studies show that when the rate of positive reinforcement increases, the classroom becomes a happier and less stressful place for both students and staff.

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1. Adapted from "The Importance of Teacher Self-Awareness in Working With Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders" by Brent G. Richardson and Margery J. Shupe, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Volume 36, No. 2, 2003, pp. 8–12. Copyright 2003 by The Council for Exceptional Children. Adapted with permission.

The Penny Transfer Technique

This is a simple strategy for shifting your focus from problem behaviour to positive behaviour.

1. Take five pennies and place them in your left pocket.
2. Identify students who regularly need prompting and reminders. Choose an individual student whose behaviour is interfering with learning.
3. Every time you are able to verbally encourage that student for something he or she does well, transfer a penny to your right pocket. Your goal is to move all five pennies to the right pocket by the end of the day.
4. Repeat this exercise each day for two weeks.
5. After one week, take a few minutes to reflect on how this strategy has affected your behaviour.
   - Are you beginning to automatically notice positive behaviours of more students?
   - Has this changed the behaviour of the student? What kind of data do you need to collect to answer this question?

Talk with colleagues

School staff need safe places to express their feelings and frustrations, and recharge their emotional batteries. Talking with supportive colleagues and community partners who work in the school is one of the most effective coping strategies.

Use humour

Many educators feel that an appropriate sense of humour is absolutely essential for long-term success in working with students. Students with behaviour disabilities often are trying to make sense out of a variety of highly charged emotional stressors (e.g., changing family structure, neglect and abuse, limited reading skills) and some students may direct their hurt and frustration at school staff and peers.

A recent study (Talbot and Lumden 2000) found that teachers who were more likely to use humour in their classroom reported lower emotional exhaustion and a higher sense of personal accomplishment. An appropriate sense of humour is also an effective strategy for engaging students who seem to be disengaged. Humour can be one of the most effective means of de-escalating potential crisis situations.

Humour that heals (rather than hurts):

- is sensitive
- is good natured
- defuses difficult situations
- brings people closer together.

Having a sense of humour in the classroom is less about telling jokes and more about maintaining a relaxed and upbeat attitude and outlook about work and life's twists. School staff who have an appropriate sense of humour convey to students that they enjoy their work and enjoy their students.

Acknowledge ways you make a difference in students' lives

School staff who perceive themselves as having the ability to bring about positive change to student behaviour and learning are more likely to perceive students as teachable and worthy of attention and effort. These school staff are also less likely to personalize the problem behaviour of students and more likely to maintain an empathetic attitude toward students who are challenging. Recognizing ways that they and others make a difference can affect the school staff's belief and commitment that they have the capacity to positively affect student performance and well-being.

Build home–school partnerships

Students with behaviour disabilities particularly benefit from a strong collaboration between professional supports, school staff and families. Teachers will often need to build rapport and a trusting relationship with parents in order to have effective discussions regarding behaviour programming, consequences and interventions. Many families with students who have behaviour disabilities have negative and unresolved conflicts related to past experiences with school and are not always open to involvement.

Some parents of students with behaviour disabilities may not be comfortable attending formal school meetings, particularly if they haven't attended such meetings before. In challenging or difficult situations, parents' care and concern for their child might show up as tension, anxiety or frustration. Teachers must remain nonjudgemental and avoid making assumptions. The parents' behaviours do not necessarily reflect how they truly feel or how they are actually coping. Emotional and other issues may get in the way of promoting an atmosphere of collaboration.

Following are some examples of parental and family issues the school may have to deal with.

- Parents who struggled at school themselves may be intimidated and feel uncomfortable about working in partnership with teachers.
- Parents may feel guilty or think they are in some way responsible for their child's difficulties. Some families may struggle with feelings of loss, grief or embarrassment as they try to come to terms with their child's behaviour disabilities.
- Family situations can make participating in the child's education a challenge; for example, parental conflict, shift work, language barriers or having more than one child in the family with behaviour disabilities.
- The parents' culture may include a belief that school and home are separate.
- Parents may have issues of trust and need time to become comfortable talking about their child.
- Parents may not have confidence in the school's ability to provide adequate support for a student with behaviour disabilities.
- Some parents find it difficult to believe that their child has different needs than other children, particularly if their child does not experience the same degree of difficulty outside of the school environment or if the child shares behavioural characteristics of other family members.
- Parents and school staff may have differing opinions about a child's particular diagnosis, what that means in terms of expectations and how severe the current problem behaviour is.

Involving parents requires time, trust and a belief that parents are partners in their child's education. Teachers can take a guiding role, particularly in the early stages, to help parents become actively engaged and committed to the process. Teachers need to help parents understand the value of a team approach to planning for behaviour support and the role they, as parents, can play in ensuring that the support accurately reflects their child's strengths and areas of need.

Take time at the outset to provide information and discuss what both parents and school staff hope to get out of these meetings. This will help foster an atmosphere of openness and partnership with parents. As parents become more comfortable with their child's learning team, they will more readily share information and perspectives that affect their child's learning.

Sample strategies for encouraging parental participation

- *Maintain an open door policy.*
  Let parents know that they are welcome to visit the classroom to observe and participate in their child's learning. Provide information about how to do this during the first open house of the school year or through the classroom newsletter. Encourage parents to share their expertise and participate in special events, field trips and presentations, and other learning activities.

- *Acknowledge the parents' role and their contribution to their child's learning team.*
  Parents need to know that school staff value their expertise and input. Children can act differently in various settings so to truly understand a child's behaviour, it is essential to include parents' perspectives and experiences.

- *Be prepared to answer parents' questions.*
  For example, parents might ask about the individual behaviour support plan for their child.
  - How will we be involved?
  - Do we attend all planning meetings for our child? If not, how do we keep informed about information shared and decisions made at those meetings?
  - When are the meetings held, and how long are they?
  - How can our child be a part of this process?
  - What kind of special support will my child receive?
  - Will my child always need this kind of support?
  - How is the individual behaviour support plan this year different from the plan for other school years? Can we change it at any time during the school year?
  - How will we know if the plan is effective?
  - How can we arrange to visit the classroom to see how our child is doing?
  - What are we expected to do at home to support our child?
  - What are our family's responsibilities regarding homework?
  - How are we expected to reinforce positive school behaviour at home?
  - How can we communicate with teachers?
  - What does our signature mean on the individual behaviour support plan and the individualized program plan (IPP)? What happens if we don't sign them?
  - What are our options if we don't agree with the plans?
  - How will progress be reported?
  - Will my child always be on an individual behaviour support plan?

- *Use parent–teacher meetings as opportunities to develop partnerships.*
  Make meetings personal and positive. When possible, offer parents a choice of meeting times and communicate directly with them through a written notice or phone call. Give them sufficient time to arrange their schedule. Make sure the meeting notice gets to parents. Since students may neglect to pass a message along, a follow-up phone call may be necessary. Always provide information about how to contact the school in case parents have to reschedule a meeting. If possible, share an agenda of the meeting ahead of time so parents have a chance to think about the kinds of questions they want to ask and the issues they would like to discuss.
- *Make effective use of behaviour support plan meetings.*
  Allow time for questions and discussion. Share information about the child's behavioural needs. The more knowledgeable parents are about their child's behaviour and learning challenges, the better partners they can be. Resources might include copies of relevant articles and the addresses of new Web sites, and information about upcoming conferences or relevant parent workshops. Have someone keep a record of the action items and provide a copy to all team members.
- *Ensure that parents understand the kinds of decisions that need to be made when developing a behaviour support plan and then ask them to think about which aspects of the plan they would like to have input into.*
  For example, parents may wish to share their child's strengths, areas of need, information about how he or she learns best, medical information, successful strategies used at home and goals they would like to see addressed in the plan. Encourage parents to speak with their child about his or her strengths, areas of need and potential goals, and share this information as well.

Tool 1 provides tips for parents who are participating in the behaviour support planning process.

Sample strategies for increasing parents' comfort levels at meetings

- *Consider convenience and comfort.*
  Arrange meetings at mutually convenient times and in a comfortable and appropriate place.
- *Be sensitive about the parents' comfort level.*
  Take this into consideration when determining how many school staff members will attend the meetings.

- *Provide parents with information about the purpose of the meeting and what will be discussed ahead of time.*
  This gives parents time to think about the items to discuss and to collect relevant information to bring to the meeting.
- *Think about the valuable information parents might have to share.*
  Include a list of questions with the meeting notice or proposed agenda. For example:
  - Are there changes at home that may be affecting your child's behaviour, such as a new family member, a change in a parent's work schedule, new after-school activities or daycare arrangements?
  - Are there new supports for the child such as time spent with a mentor or older student?
  - Have there been recent medical or other types of assessments or treatments?
- Encourage parents to make a list of key questions they want discussed during the first and subsequent meetings.
- Use the arrangement of chairs and tables to establish an atmosphere of collaboration and equity to encourage discussion.
- *Consider using chart paper and markers to record actions that are agreed on during the meeting.*
  This technique makes the process more visible for all participants.
- *Value the information that parents provide.*
  Schedule time during meetings for reflection and discussion.

Resolving differences

There are a number of strategies for resolving differences that may arise between parents and school staff. The first course of action is to try to resolve issues directly with the people who are working with the student. This means meeting as a learning team and looking for positive ways to reach agreements that everyone is satisfied with.

Tips for handling conflict and resolving differences with parents

- Establish that the child's interests must come first at all times.
- Make it clear that you want to resolve the differences for future mutual benefit (e.g., "I appreciate your willingness to …" or "I'm committed to finding a plan that will work for everyone").
- Deal specifically with solutions to the identified issues and be prepared to offer alternatives.

- Focus on the issues, not the emotions and the personalities of participants or events from the past that are no longer relevant.
- Ask parents to state their understanding of the situation and then paraphrase what you have heard.
- Separate the behaviours from the student and, as much as possible, use neutral nonjudgemental language.
- Strive to accurately understand the parents' concerns and perspectives. Sometimes a disagreement occurs as a direct result of a misunderstanding.
- Always clarify exactly what the issue is from all perspectives before jumping ahead to solutions.
- Decide what you can compromise on. Effective resolution often requires some form of compromise, especially when issues are emotional and complex.
- Be sure that expectations for the student and the programming supports are realistic and reasonable.
- Explicitly state that you are committed to the agreed-upon solutions and encourage parents to do this as well.

Tool 2 provides more information about solution-focused meetings and a sample meeting planner.

Home–school communication books

There are many ways for school staff and parents to communicate including:

- regular phone calls and e-mails
- informal visits and check-ins
- scheduled conferences and meetings
- home–school communication books.

When parents and school staff feel it would be beneficial to maintain regular and frequent home–school communication, they may choose to set up a daily or weekly communication book. It is important that parents and staff work collaboratively to decide what these communication systems should focus on and how they will be maintained. Ideally, communication should focus on the identified academic and social behaviour goals that the student is working on. This system should be a way to share good news between school and home.

Writing anecdotal notes to parents at the end of a busy school day can be difficult for school staff to manage, particularly if there are a number of students using this communication system. Writing unstructured ad-hoc notes can also deliver inconsistent messages. They may unintentionally overemphasize a single behaviour and/or under-report positive behaviour.

Checklists with scaled indicators (e.g., consistently, some of the time, seldom, not at all) of how the student demonstrated a certain observable behaviour at different times of the school day are the easiest to maintain and the most direct way to communicate.

The behaviour descriptions and data should be written in parent-friendly (and student-friendly) language. These checklists can provide useful feedback to students, and can include a self-reflection component that encourages students to evaluate and report on their own behaviour for the day.

It is important to develop strategies to make the communication system as stress-free as possible for the student, family and school staff. Students may need special reminder systems to bring the book back and forth between home and school or technology such as e-mail may offer some innovative solutions. In addition, students and their family's privacy must be protected so no confidential or potentially embarrassing or damaging information should be recorded in the book. The tone should be positive and it should be a way that family and school staff can work together to support and encourage the student.

Tool 3: Home–School Communication Book provides a sample template for a communication book.

Resources for parents

The Learning Team: A handbook for parents of children with special needs (2003) provides practical information on building a learning team, the IPP process, transition planning, resolving differences and keeping informed. Download the PDF file from Alberta Education's Web site at https://education.alberta.ca/diverse-learners/meeting-the-needs-of-each-student/everyone/handbook/.

Stengthen peer relationships

Students with behaviour disabilities often have difficulty forming positive relationships with peers because they may lack the social skills necessary to negotiate and mediate friendships. They also tend to form relationships with others who have similar behaviour difficulties and this increases the social challenges of peer relationships.

Sample strategies for developing peer relationships

- Encourage small groups of students to work collaboratively on specific projects, and help them to understand and practise the different roles involved in effective group work.
- Involve student in games and other recreational activities (with adult supervision and support).
- Use role-playing to teach alternative responses to social difficulties or conflicts among peers.
- Set up guidelines or develop a menu of strategies for resolving conflicts for students who have social difficulties. These supports can help them begin to work out minor difficulties between themselves.
- Group students strategically. Look for combinations of students who can work well together.
- Provide adequate supervision during group work to ensure positive behaviour is reinforced and to intervene quickly if bullying or other problem behaviours occur.

Use reframing instead of criticism

Look for opportunities to show students a new picture of themselves. Instead of pointing out what's wrong, describe what's right and what still needs to be done.

Intentionally use positive descriptions rather than negative descriptions. In *Raising Your Spirited Child* (1991), Mary Sheedy Kurcinka contrasts negative descriptions with positive descriptions. For example:

Negative descriptions	**Positive descriptions**
Demanding	Has high standards
Loud	Enthusiastic
Argumentative	Opinionated, strongly committed to goals
Nosy	Curious
Wild	Energetic
Explosive	Dramatic
Distractible	Perceptive

To rename and reframe with positive language, here are four simple steps.

1. Think of a student with problem behaviour.
2. Rename one or more of his or her negative traits as positive traits.
   E.g., stubborness = determination
   talking back = honesty
   constant movement = energy
3. Identify the positive traits you want to encourage him or her to practise.
4. Put into a positive sentence.

Example: With a student who tends to talk back, "Mattais, I appreciate your honesty in stating your opinion. How can you make your point in a more respectful way?" With an active, restless student, "Havla, you have great energy. Now you need to turn that energy on your social studies project and finish up that chart."

This kind of reframing can help students change their mental pictures of themselves and their power to influence situations.

Teach positive self-talk

Students with behaviour disabilities often use the kind of self-talk after a confrontation or adversarial situation that further supports their already negative view of themselves. They may think, "Oh, what an idiot," or "Why did I say that? How stupid can I be?"

Provide explicit and systematic instruction about replacing negative self-talk with positive self-talk. For example:

- Teach examples of positive self-talk statements: "I did that well," "I tried that task," "I recognized that Sue calling me a name was a trigger for me so I did a great job of walking away" or "I made a mistake but it's just a mistake so I need to keep calm."
- When teaching and practising new or replacement behaviour, prompt students to use positive self-talk.
- Prompt students to use positive self-talk in relevant situations throughout the school day.
- Model positive self-talk with comments such as, "I did a great job on that chart," "Mistakes are hard for me but I'm willing to try something new," "We all make mistakes—now, what can I learn from this?"
- Point out examples of other people using positive self-talk, especially popular peers, favourite adults or sports heroes.