

“You Can’t Do it, *yet*, Michael!”



The Art of Effective, Strength-Based Communicating with At-Risk Youth and Family Members

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The Power of a Positive, Strength-Based Approach

What is it?: An emerging approach to guiding children and youth that is exceptionally positive and inspiring. It begins with belief that all young people have or can develop strengths and utilize past successes to mitigate problem behavior and enhance social and academic functioning. It continues with practice methods that identify and marshal these strengths for necessary changes.

Strength-based practice is essentially about two words: Attitude & Actions

Educators & caregivers maximize the potential of the kids they serve when they convey an attitude to each and every one that says: *I believe in you. I know you will succeed this year and beyond and I am absolutely thrilled to be part of your life. Let's go!* And then, through their daily actions - show that they mean it.

"I was successful because you believed in me."

- Ulysses S. Grant in a letter to Abraham Lincoln

Genuine believing helps kids to feel better about themselves, attacks self-doubt ("Self-doubt kills ability." – Degas), and, most importantly, provides hope – which is humanity's fuel.

Strength-based practice is, to a great extent, about the power of positive relationships.

Research has shown that a student entering high school with a history of committing aggressive acts is not likely to commit further acts of aggression (at his/her school) if the student believes there is at least one educator at the school that thinks "I'm terrific!"

- James Garbarino, Ph.D.

"Countless studies have found that social relationships are the best guarantee of heightened well-being and lowered stress, both an antidote for depression and a prescription for high performance."

- Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*, p.14

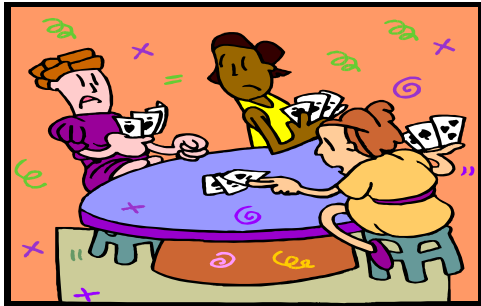
Have you ever watched an actor in a bad mood? If you're in a bad mood, it might be prudent to fake that you're not. Actors entertain for a few hours; educators save lives.

Attitude is a choice. A positive attitude sends the message: I want to be here. I care about you. I believe in you. And I know you will succeed. Which all leads to hope, happiness and success!

"The research has been absolutely clear for a long time: Students in all grades have a greater chance of success if the adults in the school believe in them, are available not only as teachers but also as caring human beings who understand that the relationship between teacher and student extends beyond the academic. Equally important, children need to understand that education is an exciting adventure not to be feared, but to embrace as strategies that will help them realize their goals throughout their lives. These simple *Common Care* standards need to be part of any education strategy.

Providing Hope & Possibility Through Metaphors & Positive Predicting

Poker



“Life is like a poker game. Even if you’re dealt a bad hand, you can still win the game. Prison is full of people who blame their upbringing for why they broke the law. But for every one person in prison who blames his/her family, there are 100 folks on the outside who were raised in similar circumstances but *chose* to be good citizens.

The Melting Snowball



“See your fears and worries about (pending issue/loss/transition) as a big snowball in the middle of your chest, and understand that as each day goes by, it’s going to melt a little. It may stay forever...but it will become so small that you can build a great life around it.”

The 2021 Edition



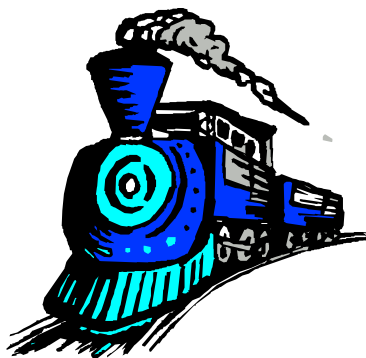
“Cars improve every year. People get better every day. You’re the 2021 Reggie. You don’t over-heat as much as the 2020 Reggie...have a sleeker design, follow the road signs better. Don’t give me this bull: ‘Same old me.’ You get better every day, man...wiser, more experienced, more mature.”

The Roadblock



“It’s not a learning disability, bipolar, Asperger’s; it’s a roadblock. All big cities have them, but people get to work on time every day. Why? They find away around it. You can to. Many successful people have roadblocks similar to yours.”

The Train



“You’re big and powerful...but you’ve gotten off track. All great trains get off track. What can we do to get to get you back on the rails? You *will* get to a good place.”



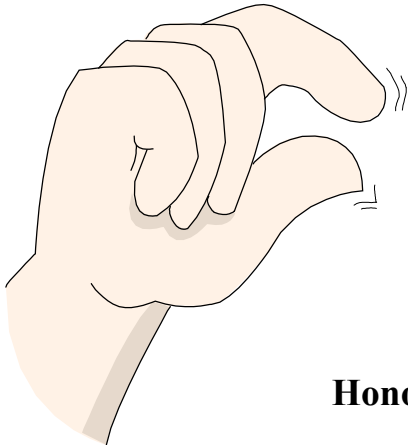
“Learning is my ticket to a great life.” You can’t get any where without a ticket!

Enact Sudden Bursts of Positivity!

Strategic Verbal Interventions

The Millimeter Acknowledgement

Strength-based practice does not assume that ownership of guilt is somehow automatically curative



“Do you think it’s slightly possible that perhaps, maybe....”

“Could, maybe, 1% of this have something do with...”

Honoring Hellos and Goodbyes

“You can’t say hello until you have first said goodbye!”

Stages of grief: Shock & Denial, Anger, Sadness, Acceptance

Examples:

Goodbye to: Ever living with biological family

Hello to: New living and life direction

Goodbye to: Loss of idealized childhood

Hello to: What was real, the good that can be remembered, and life ahead

Goodbye to: Senior year, graduation, prom, job, friends, etc.

Hello: The next chapter of my life (This chapter sucked!)
But also recognizing all the good that I’ve accomplished this far! How lucky I might have been to be in a position to do what I did and put myself in good shape for the future.

Tip: Replace cognitive distortion (I.e, one ay thinking)

Example: Angry that staff member is leaving, but feeling lucky that we got to work together for so long.



Decoding Problem Behavior

Response to problem behavior: Understand > Reframe > Squeeze

Behavior is always a message

| Pejorative Label | Positive, Hope-Based Reframe |
|----------------------------|--|
| Obnoxious | Good at pushing people away |
| Rude, arrogant | Good at affecting people |
| Resistant | Cautious |
| Lazy, un-invested | Good at preventing further hurts, failures |
| Manipulative | Good at getting needs met |
| Just looking for attention | Good at caring about and loving yourself |
| Close-mouthed | Loyal to family or friends |
| Different, odd | Under-appreciated |
| Stubborn & defiant | Good at standing up for yourself |
| Tantrum, fit, outburst | Big message |
| Learning disability | Roadblocks |

Life isn't what you see, it's what you perceive!

When you change the way you look at a challenging kid ...the kid changes.

Pejorative labels lead to the creation of *stereotype myths* (entrenched , negative self-perceptions) – Gladwell, *Outliers*

Dweck (Mindset): Encourage *Growth* vs. *Fixed* Mindsets

Growth: Value and encourage effort, trying, failing (trying again)

Fixed: Discourage fixed self-perceptions (e.g. I'm smart, I'm the best, etc.)

Reframing II

1. A youth who is always looking for attention:

R: I apologize to you for anyone who has ever put you down for looking for attention. I think it's great you look for attention – good or bad. It means you haven't quit on yourself. You probably haven't received enough attention in your life and you're looking for it now. Are there better ways to seek it? Sure, and we can talk about them. But I don't want you to spend another minute of your life thinking that there's something wrong with looking for attention!"

2. A youth who won't talk about his/her feelings:

R: You're a real loyal daughter. I think you hold everything in to protect your family and I think that's quite admirable. Your mom is very lucky to have a kid like you. But this isn't us against your family, we're on the same side (connecting statement –see page).

3. A youth who acts rudely:

R: You have an amazing ability to affect people! Or, "I think you're pretty good at giving to others what you've received."

4. A youth who acts provocatively:

R: I think you're pretty good at getting me to experience how you're feeling right now. Maybe you could use your words?

5. A parent who acts in a demanding manner:

R: You're good at advocating for yourself and your kids. You really love your kid(s). But this isn't us against you. We're on the same side. Both want the same thing...

6. A youth who seems unmotivated:

R: You're pretty good at protecting yourself. If you don't try you can't be embarrassed. But you're a bright kid and if you just take it step by step you'll probably have success.

7. A youth who frequently swears:

R: You're very expressive! You've got words I never heard before. Might use a few at the Patriot's game. How about saving the expressive language for times you're alone with one of us, not in front of the other students. Thanks.

8. A child who's bossy with peers:

R: You've got great leadership skills. You're a natural.

9. A youth who acts in a stubborn manner:

R: You're good at standing up for yourself and what you believe. Some of the greatest people in the world were quite stubborn about their causes: Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa. But the great ones all new when to give in a little.

10. A parent who is reticent, to open up:

R: Carla, I think you try very hard to protect you and your family. You love them.

Solution-Focused Questions

A model of questions that help kids recognize and build upon inherent strengths. It's the language of hope and possibility.

Explorative Historical:

When kids make hopeless comments, there are two helpful ways to respond. 1. Explore if the youth has been in this situation before and made it through. Ask how? 2. If they haven't experienced this, ask how other kids in similar situations made it through.

"I can't do this assignment! It's too hard!"

"How many difficult assignments have you been given that made you nervous just like this one? Quite a few, right. And how many did you get done? Just about all of them, right? So what are the odds you'll get this one done? Go back to any one of the difficult assignments you received – that you did well on. How did you get it done? Did you ask for help? Break it down? So, I guess you could do that this time, eh?"

"This thing will never end!"

"I hear you. You seem worried and frustrated, right? But let me ask you something. This isn't the first time something like this has affected people all over the world. There have been other flus and afflictions that arrived. But in each case, after a while, life got back to normal. Why? Isn't there a good chance, we'll do the same thing this time?"

Qualifiers:

"I hate that kid!" > "So you're saying you're really upset with him *right now*."

Past Tense:

"I'm stupid!" > "So you haven't been feeling real smart lately."

When & Will:

"Life will never be the same!" > "When it is, what will it be like?"

Scaling Questions:

"On a scale of one-to-ten, ten being that you'll make lots of friends at the new school – zero, you won't make any....what number are you at now. When it's higher in a month, how will you feel?"

Identifying In-Between Change

"What will be the first sign that you've turned the corner?"

Amplifying Change Using Speculation

"You've had some great weeks. Do you think the reason you're doing so well has something to do with you figuring out that doing better gets you more of what you want?"

Or: "You're getting older and more mature...Perhaps you've outgrown some of your younger-type behaviors?"

Visit: www.bobbertolino.com

Changing Perspective Question:

"Given all the pressure you've been under, how come you're not doing worse?"

Exception questions:

"Have there been times recently when the problem did not occur?"

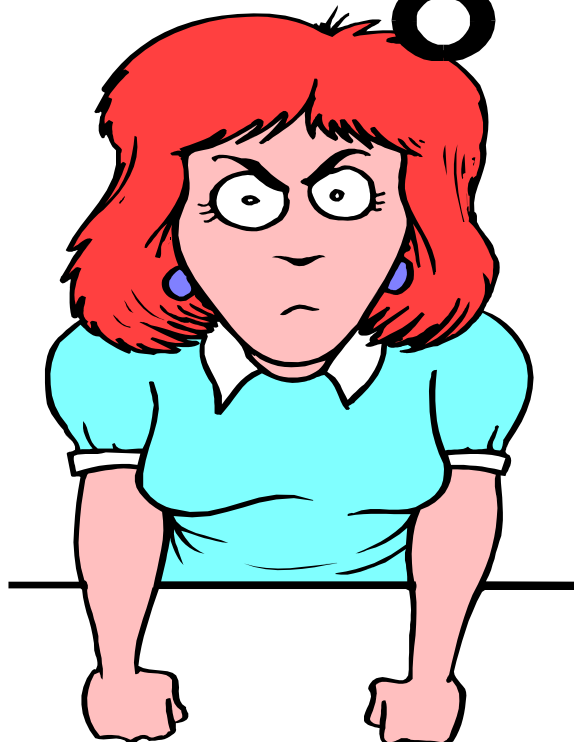
The Observing Ego

"I'm REALLY ticked...I could just -
it's okay. Stay cool...ALL feelings
are normal. Learn from this. I'm
suffering a bad self-esteem injury,
but in a little while it will heal.

Respond instead of ***React***.

Use the Force, Betty!

...I mean, Luke."



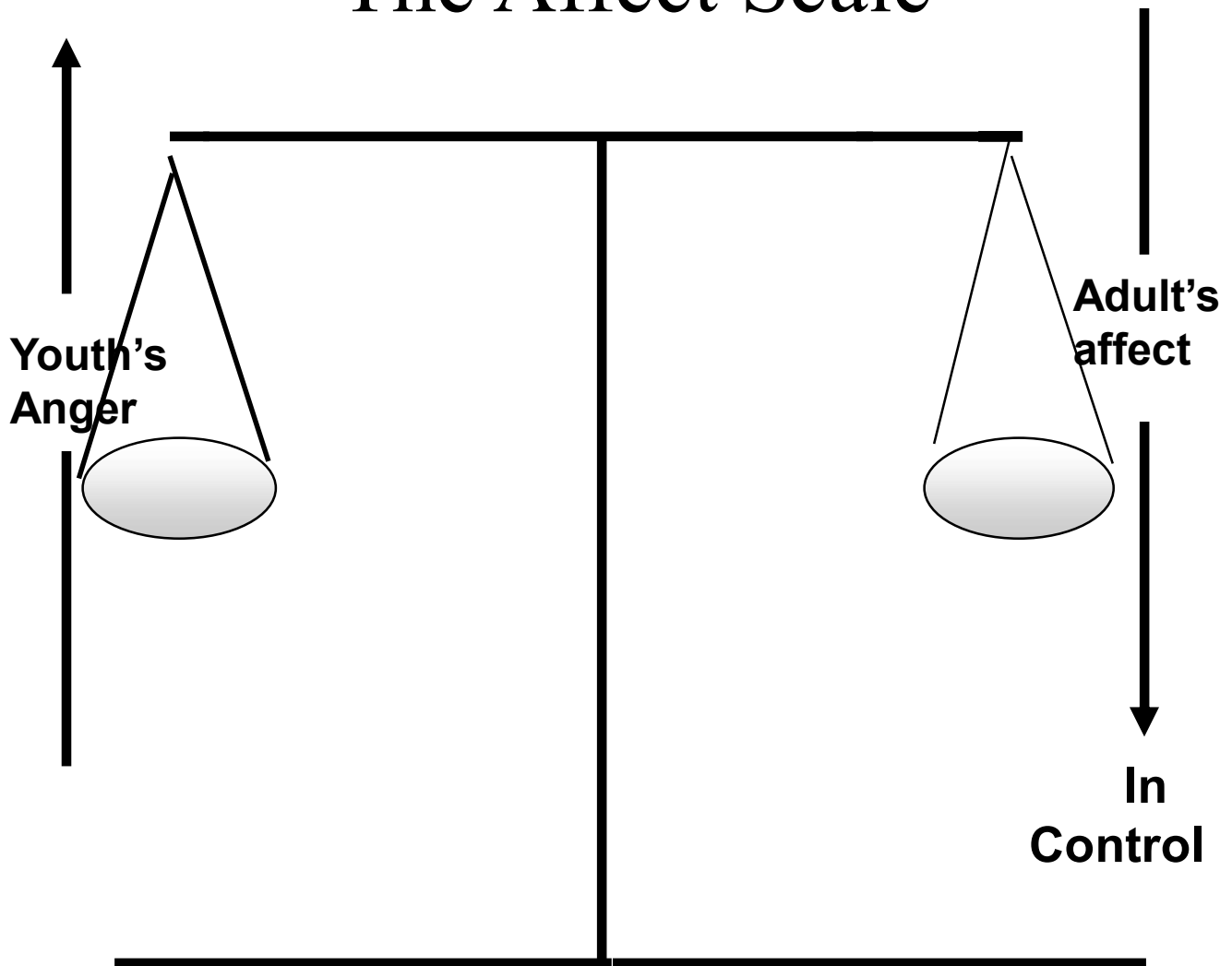
Respond =
The Golden Rule

Self esteem is
fragile even when
it's good!

Don't say or do
anything to a
youth or group
that you
wouldn't want
said or done to
you.

**Out of
Control**

The Affect Scale



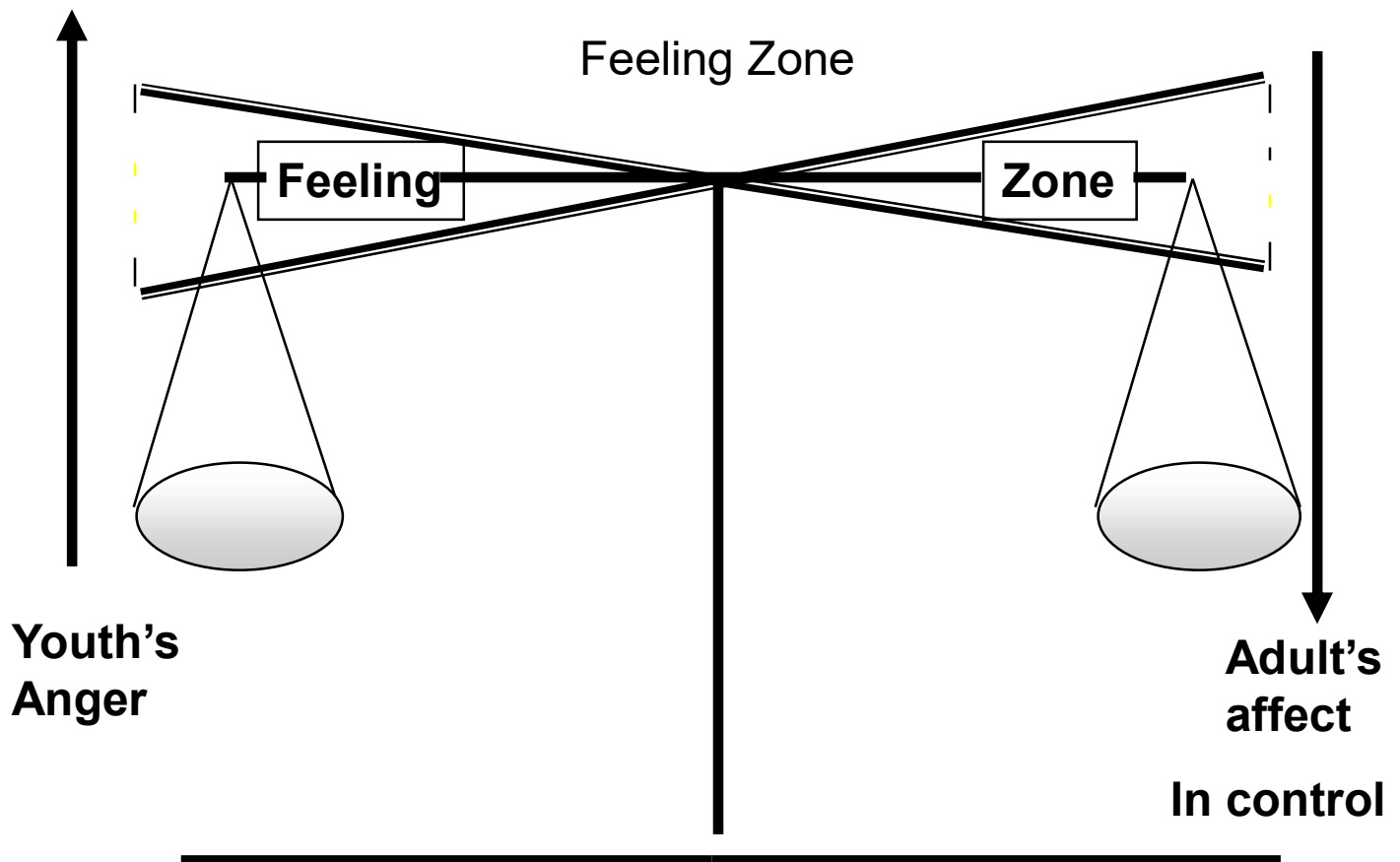
Key: Establish inverse relationship

As they get louder, you become more quiet

Safety is the only exception

Loss of
Control

The Affect Scale



Inside the “feeling zone” there is room to model affect-laden content.

Said in a controlled, but somewhat expressive manner:

“John, I’m upset about the choice you just made.”

“Mary, I’m angry about ...”

(Anger at the choice(s) – not student)

Key: If the kid escalates through the zone, the adult’s affect should grow more muted.

Content vs. Message

All verbal communication consists of two components: the *content* and *message(s)*. The content is the actual information being relayed. The message refers to how it is perceived based on the manner it was conveyed. At-risk kids (trauma victims) are hypersensitive to the messages adults send.



“You won’t be around next week?”

2 weeks later...

“*You*...won’t be around next week.”

Use “I” or “We” instead of “You” when making requests and try and start requests with “Please” and finish with “Thank you.”

“Could you please put that away, thanks.”



Body Messages

“C’mon dude...let’s get it done, and then we can boogey. NBD brother.”

NBD = No Big Deal!

vs.

“You need to get it done now!”

Speak to youth at eye level or below. Approach them in a calm manner at a 45 degree angle. Be careful about your pace, posture, facial expression, hand movements and body position.



Pre-Talk Considerations

Number One Goal: Engage!

Listen, empathize, paraphrase, offer help, apologize, repeat, offer hope...HOOK 'EM in!

- Don't be defensive. Anticipate negative comments – don't take them personally...

"It's an injury and it will heal."

- Expect *displacement* (i.e. anger directed at you that is meant for someone else.)
- Assess your relationship and feelings toward the youth. Think PIE (i.e. everyone deserves an equal slice)

"The kid who is pushing you away the most, is probably the one who needs you the most" (The Gus Chronicles I, Appelstein)

- Practice the talk in your head. Longer discussions generally have a beginning, middle, and end phase.

Other considerations: _____

Core Verbal Interventions

Non-Judgmental Exploration & Supportive Interventions:

“What’s up?” “You seem really upset!” “This stinks!” “How can I help?” “I’d feel the same way.”

Repeating or Paraphrasing w/qualifiers:

Youth: “I hate being here!”

Worker: “You’re saying that you’re pretty upset being here *right now*. I hear you. Let’s see if we can help you out while you’re here.” (Use qualifiers: yet, at the moment, right now, etc.)

Youth: This thing will never end. It will never be the same, again.

Parent: *Sometimes*, we have thoughts like those, don’t we? *Right now* we’re going through a brutal period, right?”

Feelings Exploration:

“How do you feel about that?” It is critical for kids to identify their feelings during times of stress: Name it to tame it!

Sandwich Approach:

“You made a bad decision to slam the door and swear at us. But I’m *really pleased* about how you settled down and are talking to me now. These aren’t easy times, are they? Maybe you can think about apologizing to the group at some point. You really do have the ability to make better choices when you get upset. I’ve seen you do it, right? We’re all making mistakes lately. We’re human.”

Praise and Encouragement:

“Way to go!” “That was fantastic!” “I like the way you got that done. You really paid a lot of attention to the details.” (Try and praise the specific action(s) versus the youth “You’ve done this before and can do it again.” “You have the ability to work this out, don’t you?” “Take it slowly. You can do it.”

Humor:

To a fifteen-year-old-year-old: “You’re acting just like a teenager!”

Apologizing:

“I’m sorry for raising my voice to you.”

Reasoning Responses:

“What if every parent/worker let a kid...”

Connecting Statements:

“It’s not me against you. I’m on your side. I don’t like having to keep you back.”

•Empowering Interventions:

•"What could you have done differently?" "What do you think we should do?"

Explorative (Control):

"How about we focus on what you can control?"

Explorative Responses (psychological):

"You don't usually get this upset. Could something else be bothering you?"

Explorative Responses (historical):

When kids make hopeless comments. There are two helpful ways to respond. One, explore if the kid or group have ever been in a similar situation and worked it out. (See below)
Two, if this is a first-time situation, bring up others who have been through it and succeeded...worked it out well.

"Have you ever completed such a difficult assignment? How'd you do it?"

"Have you ever got this angry and not lost your cool? Kept in control? Of course you have. What did you think and do to not blow it? Maybe you can remember those strategies – what you've done in the past – next time you feel yourself getting agitated."

"How many other kids in America, one year ago, were in your same shoes. Great kids going through a difficult divorce? And were very down like you are. Well, how many of those kids are feeling pretty good today? Have adjusted to the divorce and are back on track? And why are they back on track? So, maybe you can be one of those kids in the future if you use the same Kind of strategies."

Explorative (reflective):

"Is that behavior working for you?"

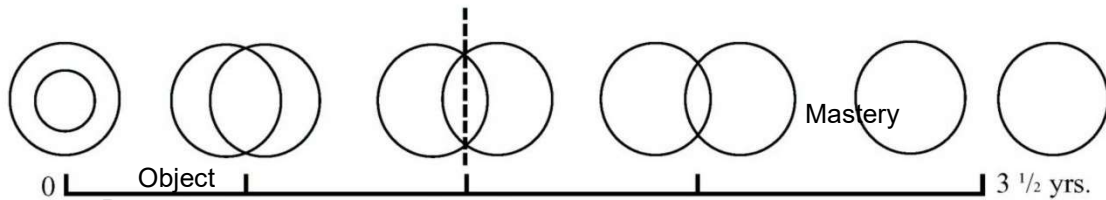
Plan Making:

"Can we make a plan to handle this situation better next time?"

THE HOLDING ENVIRONMENT

"A Total Environment Provision"

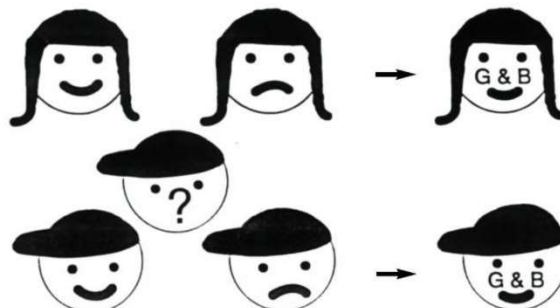
TASK: "good enough parenting"



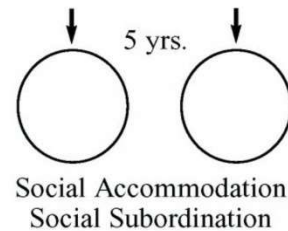
Separation-Individuation

SPLITTING MECHANISM
Good mother/Bad mother

TASK:
merge the good
and bad introjects

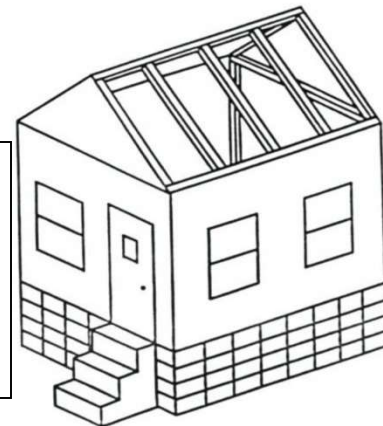


OBJECT
CONSTANCY
cohesive self
sense of self



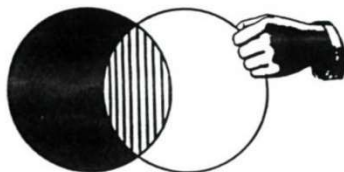
13-17 years old = Second Phase of Separation-Individuation
In other words: "I'm moving on. I'm separating from my parents. I'm thinking about:

- Who I am?
- Where I'm going?
- What I'll be?
- Where do I fit in?
- Changes in my body?
- Sexuality?

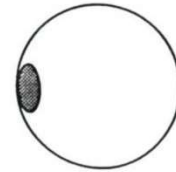
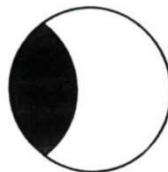


GOAL:
Filling in the emptiness

Effect of Separation



FILLERS VS. TALKERS
DEFICITS VS. CONFLICT



Splitting

Individuals whose developmental needs get skewed, primarily during the terrible two's period, tend to do a lot of *splitting*. In other words, they try to get the adults in their lives at odds with one another.

Splitting is a normal developmental occurrence that rears its head during the terrible twos, when a child is beginning to separate and individuate and doesn't want to be told what to do. When the emerging two-year old hears "No" for the first time, it causes stress, prompting the child to split: "When mom's being good to me, that must be the good mom. When she's saying 'No,' that's the bad mom." If parents remain balanced (i.e. Set reasonable limits but stay warm and loving) during the "splitting" (terrible two) period, the child emerges with a good sense of self and understands that mom (and dad) can be both good or bad, but is one cohesive person, and I am too.

Children and youth who tend to seriously split the important adults in their lives, often do so because it brings them back to the developmental stage they still need to master. If the adult caregivers refrain from splitting and stay balanced in their approach to such youth, treatment progresses.

Splitting is a stress reaction. When one feels stress, in the haste to relieve it, polarization occurs: Whatever is causing the stress is bad, and the individual is good (i.e. a split occurs)

The stress of working in an under-supported home or youth care setting coupled with the developmental need for some at-risk children and youth to provoke disharmony among the staff members, often results in programs having a great deal of inter-personal and departmental splitting. Therefore, it is essential for professionals to avoid splitting at all costs:

Splitting stops a youth – and a school/program – from moving forward.

Student: My mother said you guys are too punitive.

Teacher: I like your mom. She cares a lot about you. I'll give her a call to make sure we're on the same page.

Youth: The other staff let us stay up later.

Worker: We've got a lot of good people working here. I'll check that out with them.

Tip: Whenever you feel yourself being drawn into a "split" think:

"I'm not as good as I think and they're not as bad. Stress and a number of other factors is causing me to polarize (i.e. See things in black-and-white terms) Stop it. Find the middle ground. Communicate more. Don't be played like a puppet. Stay professional."

Every home, school or agency that guides at-risk youth should hang the following symbol throughout its setting:



Strength-Based Practice: Principles

Seeing is Believing

= Unconditional Support/Non-Contingent Reinforcement

If you visit the home of family that has a toddler or two what do you see everywhere? Toys. Did the children need to earn them? No. They were offered unconditionally. This act of unconditional love and kindness strengthens bonds, facilitates object constancy (my parents are always there for me), and enhances self-image (“I’m someone of value!”)

VS.

Believing is Seeing

= Standard behavior management

(If I do well, I am rewarded. If I don’t, I am not)

Seeing is believing produces **Optimism** – which feeds possibility, and motivates coping and adaptive behavior, even in the face of difficult odds

Seeing is Believing

“Butch, you D’a man! We’re excited that you’re here!”



NOT: *Believing is Seeing!*

“We’ll treat you nicely once you put that slingshot down, lose some weight, and get rid of that ridiculous hat!”

Seeing is believing examples:

Have lunch with a troubling youth; Do something fun with a group that is struggling; bring in a special snack; give the group extra recreation time even if they haven’t earned it. “*You don’t always have to behave great for me to treat you great. I love working with you guys and I care about you – regardless of your behavior. Of course, I like good choices and fine acting – but I’m behind you either way.*”

Perform **Deliberate Acts of Kindness/Communicate Kindness**

Humor in the Classroom

Role of Humor

- Forms a bridge between adult/child world (i.e. counters resistance)
- De-mystifies individual persona/reduces power messages
- Enhances relationship building
- Tension reducer
- Provides effective modeling
- Improves self-esteem
- Enhances identity formation (e.g. niche theory)
- It's FUN!
- It's reflective of the environment
- Demonstrates caring

Rules:

- Try! But give up quick
- Do not view the use of humor as an *extra*; it should be an integral communication technique.
- Make no assumptions about who can or can't be humorous – for everyone is capable!
- Avoid sarcasm

Forms:

- Self-Deprecating
- Slapstick
- Joke Telling
- Grandiose Praise
- Humorous Games
- Musical Expression
- Poetry

Transitional Objects & Humor

Sustain "humorous" moments via:

The written word Photos Recordings Videos



Humor needs to be taken seriously!

A study by Stanford reported that students learn 700% more in a classroom when humor is an active part of the teaching.

Positive Predicting

When you talk about the future in positive terms, you make any desired outcome more possible. And when it's more possible, it becomes more probable!

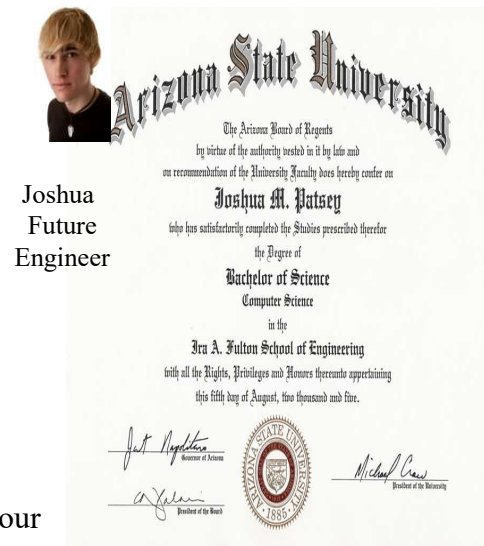
“How should we celebrate when...”

“Twenty years from now, when you're an amazingly successful businessman and family guy...which staff member from the school (Me!) do you need to come back and find and thank for always having your back?”



“Who should we call to let them know what a great job you did...?”

James Garbarino postulates that a child's inability to articulate one's future may be a clue to why some children succeed while others fail.



Suggestion: Create business cards for the students in your care.....or hang their future diploma!

Three Universal Truths from Kidsathope.com:

Children succeed when they are surrounded by adults who believe they can succeed no exceptions.

Children succeed when they have meaningful and sustainable relationships with caring adults.

Children succeed when they can articulate their future in four domains rather than one: Home and Family; Education and Career; Community and Service; and Hobbies and Recreation.

Ask your students future oriented questions that fall into one of the four domains:

1. Do you think you'll attend a trade school, junior college or four year school?
2. What professions are you leaning towards?
3. Do you think you'll travel a lot when you're older? Where?
4. Big family or small? Will you help your kids with their homework?
5. Would you prefer to live in a big city or small town?
6. What kind of hobbies will you have when you're older?
7. Will you be generous, and give your time and money to those in need?