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INTERVENING TO HELP CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

BY ELVIN GABRIEL AND SHERYL A. GREGORY

Ten-year-old John* has been labeled a “problem child” by his parents. His 5th-grade teacher, Mr. Samuels,* says that John refuses to participate in classroom activities, even though he is academically capable, and appears to be isolating himself from his peers.

Fifteen-year-old Wankel* is repeating the 9th grade.

*Names have been changed to protect the individuals' privacy.

His teacher, Mrs. Taplan,* complains that he is openly defiant toward her and frequently disrupts class activities. On three occasions within a two-week period, he became so aggressive that he severely damaged classroom property.

Behavioral and Social Characteristics

Children with emotional and behavioral disorders present unique challenges to teachers, parents, and other professionals. Such children are difficult to be around.¹ At-

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tempts to befriend them may result in rejection, verbal abuse, or physical attack. Emotional and behavioral disorders often involve **external characteristics**, such as violating the basic rights of others; physical aggression, damaging property, ignoring reprimands, and stealing; or **internal characteristics**, such as painful shyness, depression, excessive worries, and unfounded fears. Without intervention, these students may suffer from social and behavioral problems throughout their lives.

Identifying the Causes

Some experts believe that children are born with a biologically determined temperament. Although inherited temperament may not itself cause behavior problems, it may predispose the child to difficulties.² Researchers have also explored the effects of various medical and physical conditions (i.e., traumatic brain injury, fetal alcohol syndrome, and autism) on behavior.

The influence of home, peers, and school can also play a significant role in behavioral and emotional problems. Children's relationships with their parents, particularly during the early years, strongly influence how they learn to behave and cope with frustration. Likewise, teachers' interpersonal relationships and interactions with children are important in helping them understand and practice appropriate classroom behavior.³ Peers also have a strong influence. Although groups do many constructive things together such as playing games and socializing, it is usually in the company of friends that children begin to smoke, drink, and engage in other risky behaviors.⁴

Teachers and administrators must develop the skills to describe and identify problem areas before they can deal with such behaviors. Because most classroom misbehavior is triggered by a few students, teachers need to be able to predict the times and tasks during which inappropriate behavior will occur. Gifted students will more likely act up during transition periods and near the end of instruction. In contrast, low-ability students tend to misbehave in the middle of an instructional session.⁵ Heward listed five dimensions that may help teachers identify and describe

student behavior:⁶

- *Rate or Frequency*: How often a particular behavior occurs. Children with behavioral disorders misbehave more frequently.
- *Duration*: How long a child engages in a given activity. For example, most young children's temper tantrums last no more than a few minutes, but those of children with behavioral and emotional disorders may continue for more than an hour. Another problem is behaviors of too short a duration. For example, some children with emotional and behavioral disorders cannot persevere at a task for more than a few seconds at a time.
- *Topography*: The form of behavior. Disturbed children behave in ways that are seldom, if ever, seen in typical children (setting fires, self-abuse). These behaviors may be maladaptive, bizarre, or dangerous to the child or others.
- *Latency*: The length of time between a signal to perform and the beginning of the behavior. This may be too long (e.g., several minutes elapse before the child complies with the teacher's request) or too short (e.g., the child reacts by screaming and throwing tantrums at the slightest provocation or frustration, leaving no time for him or her to consider more appropriate alternative behaviors).
- *Magnitude*: The strength or intensity of the behavior. This ranges from too little (talking in a volume so low that he or she cannot be heard) to too much (e.g., slamming the door, screaming).

Keeping a written record of the items listed above will help the teacher to form hypotheses about the behavior. Knowing why a child engages in the disruptive behavior (such as avoiding school work or seeking attention) enables the teacher to suggest ways that the child can meet his or her needs in more appropriate ways. Having a record of the information will also aid in consultations with other professionals and in keeping parents and administrators informed.⁷

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Psychoeducational Interventions

Before attempting specific interventions, teachers should rule out possible medical or learning problems that may cause the child to act out. Children often react to trauma (such as war/terrorism, parental death/divorce, natural disasters) with short-term behav-

The influence of home, peers, and school can . . . play a significant role in behavioral and emotional problems.

ioral problems. Dealing with these specialized situations may require consultation with professionals. Some serious emotional disorders may require a carefully monitored regimen of medication in conjunction with counseling. However, for teachers dealing with general behavioral difficulties, the following steps can be helpful in determining appropriate behavioral plans and interventions:

Step 1: Identify the problem.

Avoid labeling the behavior. Record the specifics of where, when, and why the problem occurred. Children often engage in problematic behavior because they want something (attention, preferred activity) or desire to avoid something (school work, anxiety-producing situations). Understanding the “why” of the behavior can help you develop appropriate interventions. This is often referred to as a Functional Behavioral Assessment. (See Resources at the end of the article for forms that can assist you in this process.)

Step 2: Brainstorm about what to do.

You can do this alone or with someone else who has the background knowledge and skill to solve behavioral problems. Parents, school psychologists, teachers, and administrators can act as consultants. Families, schools, and communities must pool their skills and resources to effect change. Since parents are the most significant influence on children’s lives, they should be considered equal partners with the school in helping children succeed.

Step 3: Choose the best intervention, and implement it consistently.

Keep good records. Your goal should be to support and reinforce appropriate behavior. You may also need to stop reinforcing inappropriate behavior—for example, giving the student attention when he or she misbehaves. Clearly communicate the plan to the student and everyone involved in monitoring or implementing the interventions (other teachers, the school secretary, and/or parents).

Step 4: Evaluate.

Collecting data before, during, and after the intervention will help you determine whether the plan is working or needs modification. If you are using positive reinforcement, the reinforcers (consequences of good behavior) may need to be periodically adjusted to maintain their appeal to the child. Likewise, incrementally increasing behavioral demands works well as the child learns new skills and is able to successfully transfer them to other situations. Following the above problem-solving model will help you alleviate specific behavioral problems.

Solving General Behavioral Problems

The following recommendations may be helpful in dealing with general behavioral problems in classrooms:

1. *Classroom Rules.* They are vitally important for encouraging and reinforcing appropriate behavior. Classroom rules should be few, stated positively, and consistently enforced. For younger children, you may



need to talk about the meaning of the rule and model it. It is important to recognize and reward students who are behaving appropriately. In this way, students realize that they can get your attention through appropriate, rather than disruptive behavior.⁸

2. *Social-Skills Training.* All students can benefit from social-skills instruction, but it is especially important for those with emotional and behavioral disorders. It provides them with the tools to respond appropriately to the interpersonal, environmental, and social demands in their lives. Such training should emphasize the acquisition of acceptable behaviors and the reduction of problem behaviors. Students must learn how to use these skills appropriately in varied social settings.⁹

3. *Teaching for Success.* Academic failure or frustration can exacerbate emotional or behavioral disorder. Teachers can modify assignments and expectations without watering down the curriculum. Rewarding students for what they know or have done correctly will motivate them to do their best. Be sure to also recognize their progress toward the goals. Instruction and curriculum must be matched to the student’s academic level and ability.¹⁰

4. *Involving Peers.* This can be an especially effective tool for students with low self-esteem or painful shyness. Break-

ing the class into small groups of three to four can provide a sense of belonging, as well as a support system. Peers can also help model good behavior. In addition, a “buddy” tutoring system allows students to get extra clarification and reminders while decreasing the number of interruptions for the teacher.¹¹

5. *Behavior Contract.* The school can create a written contract in which the student agrees to behave in a certain manner, in exchange for rewards or privileges. The contract should specify the behavioral goals, how the behavior will be measured, and the date on which the contract will be reviewed. The contract should be signed by all parties involved—students, special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, and any other school personnel who may come into direct contact with the student. The teacher can help the student develop a feeling of ownership in regard to the agreement.¹²

Cultural Considerations

Teachers must recognize the powerful influence of culture on learning behavior. The child learns about appropriate behavior in the home and community, so if the parents’ expectations differ from those of the school, serious problems may result.¹³ When teachers understand cultural differences, they will be able to respond in a sensitive and respectful manner. Teachers can learn about cultural do’s and don’ts by talking with people familiar with their students’ cultures, such as bilingual educators, parents, community members, or other students.¹⁴ Understanding the sociocultural backgrounds of students “is critical for effectively teaching both academic material and the behaviors and expectations of the school.”¹⁵

Implications for Christian Teachers

Children with emotional and behavioral disorders especially need what people around them find most difficult to give—care, support, and understanding.¹⁶ While public school students with emotional and behavioral disorders are helped by individualized service plans, small church schools often do not have specialized personnel and services to provide this type of assistance. Christian teachers, however, can provide children with the positive emotional and psychological support to help them achieve optimum growth and development. Like the Master Teacher, they can seek to recog-



Because most classroom misbehavior is triggered by a few students, teachers need to be able to predict the times and tasks during which inappropriate behavior will occur.

nize the infinite possibilities in each of their students.

However, Christian teachers should not accept or tolerate behaviors that disrupt classroom learning. Along with caring and support, they must exert a firm sense of authority. Rules and guidelines for classroom behavior, together with consequences for noncompliance, should be consistently enforced. Setting limits is crucial to helping children develop self-direction and self-regulation. It stimulates their mental faculties and develops moral fortitude. All discipline must be done in love and with compassion.

Sometimes student behaviors are so extreme and uncontrollable that the teacher feels unable to intervene effectively. When this occurs, he or she should enlist the help of other school personnel to determine the best course of action. Such extreme behaviors may require the intervention of professionals, who are trained to assess the child and develop appropriate strategies and treatment plans.

Teachers can deal successfully with behaviorally and emotionally disordered students if they use biblical principles of discipline and demonstrate by word and deed that they are wholly dependent on Christ for wisdom. Ellen White wrote that the teacher who has a right understanding of the work of true education will “seek to fasten the attention of the students upon the pattern, Christ Jesus, the chiefest among ten thousand, the One altogether lovely.”¹⁷



Elvin Gabriel

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Sheryl A. Gregory

Resources

For busy teachers and those in isolated or rural settings, finding available resources may be challenging. Contact your conference educational superintendent or local

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public school officials for information and support. Public school districts often have a list of community resources for parents and teachers. In addition, school psychologists and counselors from local public schools may be able to serve as resource persons on specific issues.

In addition, the Internet has many outstanding, credible Websites that provide information for professionals working with children experiencing behavioral problems. For example, the National Association of School Psychologists (<http://www.nasponline.org>) offers easily printed materials on many topics including ADHD, childhood depression, lying, autism, conduct disorder, and functional assessments. School psychology resources (<http://www.schoolpsychology.net>) provides links to sites with a wide range of resources for

dealing with child-behavior problems.

Excellent books have been written to specifically help teachers with problem behaviors in the classroom. These books can generally be ordered from any bookstore or purchased on the Internet. The following books are especially recommended for teachers:

The Tough Kid Book - Practical Classroom Management Strategies by Ginger Rhode, William R. Jenson, and H. Kenton Reavis.

Teacher's Encyclopedia of Behavior Management: 100 Problems 500 Plans (The Library Management Motivation and Discipline Series) by Randall S. Sprick.

Functional Assessments (2000) by J. C. Witt, E. J. Daly, and G. H. Noel.

Special Kids Problem Solver: Ready-to-Use Interventions for Helping All Students With Academic, Behavioral, and Physical Problems by Kenneth Shore and Susan Kolwicz (Editor)

Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts From Your School Psychologist. Edited by Andrea S. Canter and Servio A. Carroll (available at <http://www.nasponline.org>).

The Prepare Curriculum: Teaching Prosocial Competencies (Goldstein, 1999): This program is designed for students who are aggressive, withdrawn, or otherwise deficient in social competencies. It includes activities and materials for middle and high school students in 10 areas, and deals with topics such as problem-solving, anger control, stress management, and cooperation. Published by Research Press, Department 95, P.O. Box 9177, Champaign, Illinois 61826.

Working Together (Cartledge & Kleefeld, 1994): incorporates stories and activities based on folk literature to teach social skills to students in grades 3-6, and older students with special needs. Published by American Guidance Service, 4201 Woodland Road, Circle Pines, Minnesota 55014.

Skillstreaming the Adolescent: New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills by Arnold P. Goldstein and Ellen McGinnis (1997) and *Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child: New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills* by the same authors (1997) provide activities designed to develop competence in dealing with peers, family, and authority figures. Skillstreaming programs for elementary and preschool children are also available. Research Press, Department 95, P.O. Box 9177, Champaign, Illinois 61826.

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DEAN'S COLUMN

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operate a coeducational institution that emphasized moral development for both genders. In both areas, they were going against the mainstream of American education. It soon became apparent that they could not accomplish their goals without instituting programs that emphasized whole-person development beyond the classroom.

By its second year (1875), Battle Creek College had begun to assume more responsibility for student housing options.⁷ After 10 years of operation (1884), all women were housed in South Hall unless they lived with parents.⁸ Finally, in 1887, some 13 years after the college opened; both men and women were housed on campus. The women moved into West Hall; the men into the recently vacated South Hall.⁹ Perhaps to make a statement about the importance of this step, the first preceptors (deans) were W. W. Prescott and his wife, Daisy. Prescott was also college president.¹⁰

That's how residence-life began in the educational ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Future columns will discuss other aspects of residence life and the role of residence-hall deans. ✍

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