

MANAGING IMMEDIATE BEHAVIOR

from Re-educating Troubled Youth
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Fritz Redl identified a full range of possible interventions that are employed to manage immediate behavior. He noted that sometimes one chooses strategically not to intervene, either because one accepts the behavior (e.g., "This is what we should expect from youngsters at this age") or because one tolerates the behavior ("I don't like it but I think they are going to have to learn to handle this themselves"). If the teacher or group worker decides to intervene, the following are the major methods available based on Redl's clinical research (Redl and Wineman, 1952).

1) **Planned ignoring:** If the adult assumes that a given behavior will run its course and have minimal impact, the decision might be to ignore the behavior. Sometimes a behavior is ignored because the child seems to be seeking attention for his naughtiness, and to respond even with a punishment would be reinforcing.

Two boys are shadow boxing and seem to be taunting the adult to intervene and make them stop. The adult, concluding that they are not intent on harming one another, pretends it is not happening and the youngsters discontinue their activity.

Naturally, there are many situations in which ignoring behavior is the wrong thing to do. Ignoring a serious infraction may actually signal acceptance. Thus a teacher who ignores a racial insult directed at a minority youth would be giving tacit approval to such name calling. Likewise, some incidents are highly likely to become contagious, and if the teacher does not stop the behavior, several other behavioral problems will probably result.

2) **Signaling:** Sometimes a youngster is unaware of his or her behavior or is unable to control it but will respond to some nonverbal signal from the adult. This signal may be as simple as eye contact, perhaps while shaking one's head no, or it could be a more personalized signal understood to the parties involved. The advantage of signals is that the adult can intervene quickly and quietly, and most signals do not elicit a negative response from the youth.

Tony is standing on a piece of furniture. The adult catches his eye and simply points to the ground, whereupon Tony dismounts from his perch.

Signaling cannot be used in highly explosive situations and may be an insufficient response to a serious behavioral infraction. Signaling can be highly personalized; for example, an adult and youth can agree that whenever the youth is about to be drawn into negative behavior by a peer, the adult will signal a warning. Thus, signaling is an efficient intervention if applied to the proper behavior.

3) **Proximity and Touch Contact:** Sometimes excitement, anxiety, and restlessness can be minimized by physical proximity between the child and adult. By walking to an area around or near the child, or by calling the child to an area near the adult, one may effectively alter the dynamics of the problem. Children respond in different ways to proximity, particularly if it involves very close contact, such as touching, and an adult must be aware of a given child's response.

Two boys working on a craft project in a corner of the room are becoming unruly. The adult walks over toward that corner, not with the attitude of policing the area, but to inquire about how their project is coming. The youngsters resume task-oriented behavior.

One caution about the use of proximity is that certain children may learn to lure the adult closer to them through acting out behavior. Other children find close proximity with an adult, particularly touching, to be highly aversive. The unique meaning that closeness and physical contact has to a child must be understood if the adult is to use this technique skillfully.

4. **Interest Boosting:** Many of the problems of troubled youngsters can be either ameliorated or prevented by increasing the interest level in the curriculum or activity at hand. However, if the adult cannot become excited about the topic or activity, it should not be surprising if the youngsters act bored. One can raise the interest level of any activity in various ways. One possibility is to promote those aspects of a given topic or activity that might attract the youngsters' attention.

Youngsters who do not know much about soccer or show little interest in it become very involved by viewing an action-packed movie or championship soccer game.

Another approach to interest-boosting involves tying the activity to an existing interest of the youngster.

Knowing that a given child is interested in diesel trucks, one could tap this interest and tie it to a science experiment showing that air under high pressure becomes heated.

Many troubled youth seem to have an almost insatiable appetite for adventure, and thus it will be a considerable challenge to the adult to keep these children interested and involved. Of course, it is neither necessary nor desirable for the adult to keep a group in a constant state of "hype". Sometimes youngsters need the opportunity to learn to complete tasks or activities that are in fact unexciting and mundane.

Nevertheless, the planned use of interest boosting can be a powerful technique in the repertoire of the behavioral manager.

5) **Hypodermic Affection:** Redl acknowledges that this was a rather contrived term, meant simply to convey that sometimes by giving a dose of warm attention, one can manage a particular problem.

Redl tells of a situation in which a sobbing, violently upset child who felt that nobody liked him was making an attempt to jump out the second story window of the group home. Redl wrapped his arms around the youngster, told him everything was okay, and assured him he was loved. The youngster stopped sobbing and in a few minutes was back to normal.

Like the other management techniques, hypodermic affection has its contraindications. Redl himself noted that special doses of love should not be seen as cures for temper tantrums or negativistic behavior. Its strategic use is to help enable a youngster whose own self control is deteriorating to regain his composure. If doses of attention followed most negative behavior, the obvious result would be that one would reinforce destructive and aggressive acts.

6) **Humor:** This technique probably has been used since humans first learned to laugh as a means of emotional release. The adult who can spontaneously but skillfully invoke humor into an otherwise difficult situation has learned to use an important tool. Not only does humor serve to reduce immediate tension, but it allows participants in a power struggle to save face and it legitimizes a complete reversal of the effective climate from negative to positive.

7) **Lowering Hurdles:** Many behavioral problems result from frustration at not being able to complete a task successfully. By lessening the difficulty, breaking the task into smaller steps, or helping the youngster approach the task from another direction, the adult can avoid the frustration or failure.

The craft shop at the University of Michigan Fresh Air Camp always had an abundance of instant-success projects. They were designed so that a youngster with an extremely short attention span or a low frustration tolerance would have only to "blow" upon them and a beautiful, completed project would spring to life.

This technique too has its flaws, for there are benefits to frustration, and excessive use of hurdle help will only serve to keep youngsters incompetent and over protected. Children should not be deprived of the opportunity of struggling with a difficult challenge and knowing the reality of both success and failure.

8) **Interpretation:** Redl did not mean by this term that one would go about the group offering amateur psychoanalytic insights as to why children are

behaving as they do. Instead, this technique involves providing youngsters with concrete, reality-based explanations of what is happening to them in a given behavioral situation, under the assumption that this information might help them organize their experience.

Everyone in the room was sweltering from spending too much time together in a place that desperately needed air conditioning. People were getting on one another's nerves and irritability was rampant. "I know we are all getting a little restless and short-tempered because of the heat," said the adult, "so we'll have to try extra hard not to make things worse for one another."

Interpretation can, of course, be easily overused. If it is to be effective, the people involved must be quite capable of interrupting their own behavior. We know that much behavior is not under such simple verbal control. Furthermore, a worker who goes about offering uninvited interpretations of everybody's actions can easily become more of an annoyance than a help.

9) **Regrouping:** Sometimes the simple device of changing the group's psychological constellation will eradicate a problem that otherwise would require considerable management effort. Regrouping at the extreme may involve removing a youngster from a given group and assigning him elsewhere, such as transferring a youth to different school. More commonly, regrouping will occur within the immediate setting, perhaps by assigning the youngster to another subgroup.

Although most of the class was working on the assignment, two boys were distracting peers in their respective corners of the room. Tony, as usual, had completed the exercise ahead of everyone else, was now bored, and was seeking to communicate with those around him. Bill, on the other hand, had scarcely begun, looked completely puzzled, and found it more fun to giggle with those around him than to face the task. The teacher resolved both problems simultaneously by calling Tony and Bill over to the other side of the room and asking Tony to help Bill understand the project and complete it. Soon these two boys were busily involved in the task at hand and those they had been distracting resumed their work.

Sometimes regrouping only avoids dealing with an issue that merits our attention. Thus although we might use regrouping to separate two youngsters who cannot get along, it might be preferable if could figure out why they are having trouble and teach them to relate with one another.

10) **Restructuring:** Many behavioral problems can be prevented or resolved by altering the structure of a particular activity. When activities are completely unstructured, troubled youngsters frequently find it very hard to organize themselves and keep out of difficulty. Most young people require some sort of routine or ritual that can provide a sense of order and flow to their behavior. Transition times (moving from one structure to another) frequently are fraught with complications and thus it may be necessary with some children to structure these interludes.

Because the children always seem to have trouble choosing up sides, today I handed each a card with the numbers 1, 2, 3 printed on it as they entered the room. I then began the activity by saying, "Everybody with the card number 1 please stand in this corner; everybody with the card number 2, over there; and everybody with the card number 3, over here." It took half the time and there were none of the fights associated with choosing up sides.

Another important type of structure pertains to expectations. If youngsters know or can be told what is to happen in a certain situation, the behavior will most likely be more organized.

Knowing of the Pandemonium that could result in our trip to the hockey stadium, I laid down this structure for the youth: "When we arrive, we are going to go to the rest room if we need to, buy our popcorn, and then we will sit together in a group." Without setting these expectations, I have found that I cannot keep my group assembled.

The only obvious limitations of the use of structure would be using it excessively. All children need free time when their activity is not programmed for them. The purpose of structure is to help youngsters learn to organize themselves in the hope that they will eventually be able to organize their own behavior through internal structure rather than having it imposed externally.

11) **Direct appeal:** Frequently a drastic intervention is not at all necessary; youngsters may respond to a simple appeal. Redl authored a large list of potential examples of the use of this technique, including the following:

Appealing to relationship: "Listen, you don't have to act like this. I've been fair to you."

Appealing to reality: "You can't do that; it's dangerous. You might fall."

Appealing to values: "You wouldn't really want to do that, would you?"

Appealing to group code: "Do you think others in your group would think that is fair?"

Appealing to authority: "What do you think the principal (your parents, etc.) would think?"

Appealing to pride: "You don't have to act that way any more. You're much more mature now."

Youngsters vary greatly in their receptiveness to appeals. Because an appeal is an easy technique to use, it is also easy to overuse. The adult who is constantly asking youngsters to change their behavior can become very ineffective.

12) **Limiting Space and Tools:** The physical space itself, and the presence of seductive objects, can affect a youngster's behavior.

Six special education students were crammed in a classroom not much larger than an office. They were all within reach of one another, and could fiddle with props such as Venetian blinds, the thermostat, and pictures on the wall without even leaving their desks.

Many objects almost invite youngsters to handle and perhaps misuse them. Bats are for hitting; balls for bouncing; knives are for cutting; flashlights are for shining; and if we are not interested in any of these activities, we should not have the objects near at hand. The manner in which concrete materials are distributed can also serve to create or climax problems.

The teacher who says, "You can go up to the table and get your copy of the exercise" may be inviting a shoving match, whereas if the same objects were dealt out to children at their desks, problems could be prevented.

A number of years ago it was fashionable in classrooms of hyperactive and disturbed children to remove any kind of potentially distracting stimuli. Certainly this became excessive as teachers purged the classroom of guppies, posters, and brightly colored globes or maps, and even avoided wearing jewelry and attractive clothing. The hope was that if only a pencil, a worksheet, and a cubicle remained, the youngster would not be distracted. Although few now advocate such thoroughgoing stimulus deprivation, the effective youth worker or teacher needs to be very cognizant of the ability of the physical environment to elicit appropriate or inappropriate behavior.

13) **Physical Removal:** Redl used the term "antiseptic bouncing" to refer to the nonpunitive removal of a youngster from the group situation. The purpose of this removal was not banishment, or even to deprive the youngster of positive reinforcement, but to allow him or her an opportunity to gain behavioral composure in the absence of an audience.

Marie became so uncontrolled while watching "Peter Pan" on television that she began "flying" around the room, jumping from couch to couch, much to the delight of her peers. When she was unable to stop after verbal appeals, the staff member led her from the room and had her sit quietly until she was more composed and could return to the room.

There has been a great deal of concern about the misuse of techniques for removal in a number of treatment programs. In most settings, workers find it necessary at some point to remove youngsters from the group, but the manner in which this is done varies greatly from setting to setting. The process may be given names such as "time out," "seclusion," "solitary," or "going to your room." Of particular concern with emotionally disturbed children is the kind of supervision they receive during this time when they are removed. Many quality treatment programs have clearly defined procedures governing the use of exclusion that specify the kind of monitoring required for the youth during such time. Since it is known that the risk of suicide among disturbed youth is much higher when they are in seclusion because of behavioral problems, staff have a very profound responsibility to ensure the physical (and psychological) safety of the youth. A youth who has been excluded at a time of emotional upset and aggressive behavior can readily turn that aggression on himself, as seen in the following example taken from a psychiatric residential treatment center.

Todd had been having difficulty with peers all evening and finally ended up brandishing a pool cue as weapon in some disagreement with peers. The psychiatric resident on call was summoned and Todd was confined to his room. In a few minutes Todd began destroying his room and throwing drawers out the door, whereupon he was removed to a more secure isolation room, which was locked and furnished with only a mattress on the floor. The procedures then in effect called for staff to visually check on him through a small window in the doorway at least every 15 minutes. At the first check staff noticed that the mattress had been torn to shreds but Todd was not visible. Upon unlocking the door, it was discovered that Todd had taken strips of cloth, wrapped them around his neck, tied them to the inside doorknob and attempted to hang himself in a seated position. Fortunately, Todd was still conscious; the staff removed Todd's homemade noose. While moments before Todd had been attacking everyone in sight, all he could do now was to sob, "Why did you stop me? Let me die. I'm no good; let me die."

14) **Physical Restraint:** However skillful staff are in using less extreme measures, there is always the possibility that a particular youngster will be so upset and out of control that his behavior presents a serious risk to himself and to others. It may not be possible or advisable to use an isolation room for restraint. (Where would one isolate a youngster while on a camping expedition?) Physical restraint becomes an extreme but sometimes necessary intervention technique.

If the adult is considerably larger and stronger than the child, then physical restraint can usually be executed with little danger of hurting either the child or the adult. A useful technique is for the adult to stand behind the child and wrap the child's arms across the child's stomach. The child cannot hurt himself in this position, and if the adult is cautious about the possibility of being kicked or butted with the head, the adult can also avoid injury. A particularly strong youngster may need to be held on the floor in a prone position. Although a youth so restrained will probably accuse the adult of hurting him, in reality the child is not being hurt when properly held.

If the child's physical size, strength, or agility closely matches or exceeds that of the adult, then it is inadvisable to use physical restraint since restraint itself is likely to cause injury to one or both parties. In that situation it may be necessary to call for assistance. In a school setting this might involve summoning the principal, coach, or custodian. With young people who are virtually adults in size and strength, it may even be necessary in isolated situations to call on school security or law enforcement personnel.

Another approach that has worked effectively in peer group treatment programs is to involve other youth strategically in the process of containing a youth who is otherwise going to hurt someone. The fact that difficult youth can undertake this task responsibly is a surprise to many people who are accustomed to seeing peer groups cheer on youth who are in combat with one another or with authority figures. However, a generally concerned and well trained group can assist in restraining a youngster who otherwise would hurt himself or others. Needless to say, the adult present in such a situation bears the ultimate responsibility for taking whatever precautions are necessary to minimize the likelihood that anyone will be hurt in the process.

Observations of many instances in which physical restraint has been used suggest that most youngsters behave in a predictable fashion when restrained. (Long and Duffner, 1980):

The Struggle: Initially the youngster will fight violently to break loose, will make every manner of verbal threat or appeal he can think of. He may threaten to kill everybody; he may scream that the adult or group restraining him is breaking his arm; he may shout, plead, spit, bite, or butt. It is important that the person or persons doing the restraining carry it out with a quiet, gentle strength. Any counter aggressive hostility, verbal or nonverbal, will serve only to support the youth's distorted perception that he is being attacked and will interfere with subsequent attempts to communicate about the episode. This in a quiet, steady, concerned manner, the person or persons restraining should communicate to the youth that he needs to settle down and relax, that no one will hurt him, that everybody is concerned about helping him, and that he is able to get control of himself.

Emotional Release: Unable to prevail through aggression, the child loses emotional control, defenses collapse, and toughness is stripped away. As he realizes that he can't extricate himself and that he is, in fact, being controlled, his aggression turns to tears. As the tenor of the crying changes from anger to child-like dependency, the adult is usually able to relax the restraint slightly.

Regaining Self-Control: The youth next may enter a period of silence in order to regain control of emotions and behavior. If the physical restraint has not been removed already, it can usually be discontinued at this time. The youngster may now be ready to communicate in a more coherent and logical fashion. Some children may need to sulk for awhile, but a skillful adult can determine the time and manner for reopening communication.

Few individuals have learned through normal life experiences how to handle physical restraining in a therapeutic manner. Everything about such an episode tends to call forth responses of either fear or aggression from the adult. Thus a crucial factor in using physical restraint is that the adult be able to monitor and control his own feelings of anxiety or aggression. As the adult is able to communicate genuine concern even in this kind of crisis, he has the opportunity of making a significant impact on the way the child views the adult and himself.

On rare occasions, one can encounter a youngster who seems to seek out physical restraint and obtain some sort of gratification from being held by the adult. Of course in this situation one does not want to use physical restraint in such a reinforcing fashion. It may be better with such a youngster to (1) try to avoid physical restraint, (2) use physical isolation as an alternative to restraint, or (3) physically restrain the child in a manner that minimizes physical contact between the child and adult. In this regard, a variation with smaller youngsters is to place the child in a chair and restrain him in the usual fashion with the adult holding the child's arms but kneeling behind the chair. This avoids the "cradled in the arms of adults" position, which is probably reinforcing to a small number of children. Finally, physical restraint is among the most extreme interventions and should be used only when absolutely necessary, when all other possibilities have been ruled out, and when it can be applied in a safe and therapeutic manner.

15) **Authoritarian Interference:** Some behavior is so unacceptable and even outrageous that it requires a sharp and clear statement by the adult that it is completely forbidden. In such a situation we aren't appealing to a youngster to stop his behavior; rather, we simply say NO in such a way that children understand that we mean it, that there is no choice in the matter, and that we will not yield to arguments, explanations, or anything else. Some adults are much more comfortable (and effective) using this technique than others. Certainly if the adult used this style all of the time, he or she would be considered tyrannical. But all people who work with youngsters need to know how to lay down the law in a way that conveys effectively "this is it." Needless to say, when the adult acts that strongly, he or she is going to have to back it up if young people do not respond. Thus it is important that this technique be used only when such a strong statement is necessary and when the adult is willing to follow through with some appropriate action. It has been said that working with troubled youth is a situation of saying no, meaning no, and then learning how to save face. Although that may be true in some situations, it is not the case with this technique.

16) **Promises and Rewards:** All teachers and youth workers seem to use positive reinforcement or the promise of positive reinforcement in the attempt to mold behavior. Certainly this is one of the problems with this approach. He notes that some children live only in the present and are not able to respond to possible future rewards. Also, many troubled youngsters cannot handle the deprivation of a reward without experiencing it as a personal attack. The unequal disposition of rewards can give rise to high levels of sibling rivalry between youngsters. Finally, rewards can communicate to a youngster that we like him only when he is good. Redl's view on rewards may seem dissonant to contemporary practitioner cognizant of the huge literature supporting the value of positive reinforcement. Nevertheless, he is not suggesting that rewards cannot be useful in the teaching process, but only that we need to be attuned to the inner processes that may accompany our dispensing of rewards or the promise of rewards. In fact, the phenomenon of "counter-control," which has frequently been noted in behavior modification programs, gives support to Redl's notion that how youngsters see rewards can be most important. We observed an example of counter control in a particularly sophisticated 12 year old boy who enjoyed leading his peers in wild activities carefully calculated to lose all of the 200 possible points that each of them could earn in the token system for a particular day. Such activity would not have surprised Redl at all, for he always made it clear that every intervention must be considered not only in light of its effect on observable behavior but also for its impact on the inner life of the child.

17) Threats and Punishments: As Redl suggested, the issue of punishment is probably one of the most befuddled topics in educational practice and thought. Professionals cannot even communicate intelligently about punishment because there are so many definitions of punishment. Redl saw threat as related to punishment in the same way that promise was related to reward, and just as he raised concerns about how young people would interpret the process of "rewarding" so also he raised troubling questions about how youngsters might interpret the process of punishing. According to Redl, punishment can be effective only if certain conditions are met:

- The punishment must be experienced as unpleasant or aversive.
- The negative feelings resulting from punishment must be tied to the behavior being punished and not to the person inflicting the punishment.
- The punishment must be internalized in such a way as to control the behavior in question effectively, rather than to produce defensiveness, anxiety, aggression, self-recrimination, or withdrawal.

Redl went on to show how troubled youngsters frequently distort the punishment experience. Some youngsters with very poor self concepts or self abusive tendencies may in fact draw punishment to themselves. Others may seem to enjoy punishment experience, perhaps because that is the way in which they have received attention in the past. Troubled youth may distort the intention of the punishing adult, thus becoming preoccupied with the adult as an enemy rather than as one trying to help them change their behavior. For many youngsters punishment is not the end of the change of causation but the beginning of one: the punishment allows an excuse or reason for all manner of subsequent maladaptive behavior, such as vengeance, aggression, withdrawal, and lowered self-esteem.

In spite of these cautions it should be noted that Redl himself provides numerous examples of situations in which punishment was used effectively in his Pioneer House program. Usually these applications had the quality of natural or logical consequences. For instance, dangerous behavior in the station wagon would be met by the withdrawal of the station wagon from use in activities. In addition to natural consequences, which Redl seems to support, he also notes that restitution is not the same as punishment. Thus, when a youngster messes up the bunks of other children, there can be value in requiring him to correct the problem he created. Such restitution arrangements can help youngsters reduce guilt feelings and re-establish their positive relationships with individuals whom they have hurt. Redl also notes that some of the verbal interventions used in life space interviews may seem to an outsider to be punishing. For example, a reality rub-in may involve a strong challenge to a youngster's behavior and being confronted can in fact be painful. The distinction that Redl makes is that of intent: the purpose of the confrontation is not to create pain but to help the youngster look at himself.

Redl also makes the distinction between threats and warnings. If a specific reality response will ensue from a particular line of behavior, the adult should feel free to warn the youngsters. Children can, for example, be told that if they cannot handle a certain activity without getting wild, they will have to return to some less exciting pastime.

Many of the 17 techniques described by Redl are not as separate from each other as their labels might imply. Most workers influence children's behavior by using a variety of these methods. Redl's goal in identifying these techniques was to highlight the wide range of interventions possible and to stimulate a careful analysis of the strengths and limitations associated with various procedures. Redl emphasized that he had no interest in substituting a bagful of interference tricks for a complete program of therapeutic processes. It is crucial, however, that adults know what they are doing when they have to interfere with behavior in the daily life of troubled children.