Building Relationships with Challenging Children

Teachers who intervene gently, forego punishment, work at bonding, and ensure student success can help at-risk students make positive changes in their lives and in the classroom.

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In their classic study, *400 Losers*, Ahlstrom and Havighurst (1971) were chagrined to discover that their six-year-long, intensive intervention program did not help a group of at-risk youth find success. But, to their surprise, a handful of the participants did turn their lives around. The adolescents who "made it" all had one experience in common: Each had developed a special relationship with either a teacher or a work supervisor during the treatment program. These adults valued the students, treated them as individuals, and expressed faith in their ability to succeed.

A strong relationship with an adult enables an at-risk youth to make life-altering changes. Educators can use specific strategies to develop these nurturing relationships, as one teacher's story demonstrates.

The Chocolate Milk Incident

*When the 1st graders came into Ms. Hubble's room from recess, they were rambunctious and hard to settle. "Take your seats," Ms. Hubble told them, "and my two helpers for the week will come by with milk." That helped. At least, it helped everyone except Andreen. As the other students finished their milk and the helpers collected the empty cartons, Andreen got up from her desk. Taking her milk with her, she went to the salamander cage at the back of the room. She peered into the cage and began poking at the salamanders with her straw.*

"Please take your seat, Andreen," Ms. Hubble said quietly, walking up to the girl and gently putting a hand on her shoulder. Lurching away, Andreen threw her milk carton into the air. The carton hit Ms. Hubble on the chest, and chocolate milk gushed out, staining the teacher's white blouse.

Andreen was a new student in Ms. Hubble's class. A week ago, her mother had brought her to school but stayed only long enough to complete the necessary paperwork. Officially, Ms. Hubble knew little about Andreen, but the girl's appearance and behavior told the big picture.
The facts that emerged when Andreen's records arrived from her previous school only filled in the blanks.

On her first day, Andreen came into the classroom disheveled and unkempt. Her long auburn hair, tangled and unwashed, coursed down her back over her faded brown dress. Seeing Andreen’s appearance and downcast demeanor, the other 1st graders instantly shunned the little girl as if her plight were contagious.

But Andreen's appearance was not her only problem. Andreen had an attitude, and that attitude was not endearing. She was a sullen, angry little girl, hypersensitive about her space and possessions. She pushed or kicked students who walked close to her desk. At recess, her classmates quickly learned to exclude her because she played to win, even if it meant bullying and inventing new rules. In the classroom, Andreen seldom complied with Ms. Hubble's requests. Just that morning, Ms. Hubble had asked Andreen to put her math paper away and finish it later, and the girl had ripped up her paper and defiantly thrown it into her desk.

For a week, Ms. Hubble had been hoping that Andreen's attitude would improve with her adjustment to the new school. But now Ms. Hubble realized that if the little girl was ever going to be successful in school, she, as her teacher, needed to immediately put time and energy into building a relationship with her.

**Gentle Intervention**

As chocolate milk seeped into her blouse, Ms. Hubble reminded herself that her response to this incident would set the tone for their relationship. She must let Andreen know that she was physically and emotionally safe in her teacher's presence despite this behavior. The situation required a gentle intervention.

The principle of this key relationship-building technique is that when a child engages in behavior that threatens health, safety, property, and basic rights, educators do only what is necessary to protect themselves and others (Hall, 1989). This approach reduces the number of behaviors requiring intervention, so the educator can ignore a lot of students' inappropriate behaviors for the moment and deal with them later if necessary. A gentle intervention defuses rather than detonates the situation and allows the student to maintain a sense of dignity.

After Andreen threw the milk, she turned her back on Ms. Hubble and walked quickly toward another learning center, looking as if she were about to shove the first available thing off the table. "Students," the teacher announced to the class, "it's time for reading. Everyone take out your reading book." Andreen stopped. Turning, she looked at Ms. Hubble. Stepping to her left, so as to give Andreen an unobstructed path to her desk, Ms. Hubble whispered to Andreen, "We're on page 80." For a moment, Andreen thought about what to do. Then she abruptly went to her desk and got out her reading book. As Ms. Hubble walked to the front of the room, she caught Andreen's eye and nodded her approval.

Ms. Hubble's gentle intervention had five important components:

- She unobtrusively interrupted behavior that might have resulted in property destruction.
She preserved Andreen's dignity.

She directed Andreen toward a positive response.

Her directive led Andreen to an appropriate response that could be praised.

Her directive was, at that moment, the easiest response for Andreen to make. After all, the other students were getting out their reading books, and the most unobstructed path was to her desk.

What Ms. Hubble didn't do as the chocolate milk ran down her blouse was as important as what she did. To her credit, the teacher resisted the emotion-driven impulse to reprimand Andreen. At the very least, Ms. Hubble might have said, "Look at what you've done! You've stained my blouse. You should be ashamed of yourself." That would have felt good! Certainly Andreen had it coming. And the teacher might have added, "And for that little shenanigan, Andreen, you'll stay in from recess for the rest of the week!"

In the heat of the moment, any or all of those actions would have been understandable. But what would have been their effect? In all likelihood, either the admonition or the consequence would have spurred Andreen to sweep her arm across the table, knocking something to the floor. In response, Ms. Hubble would have had to move quickly to restrain Andreen before she broke more things; and if Andreen resisted, Ms. Hubble might have had to drag her down to the principal's office where, by golly, she would have learned her lesson!

Or would she have? Actually, all Andreen would have learned is that Ms. Hubble is, in her opinion, a mean person. An hour later, Andreen would have returned to the classroom temporarily subdued but full of resentment and mistrust.

**No Punishment**

Had Ms. Hubble made those comments to Andreen or restricted her recess, the teacher would have punished Andreen. Punishment, we believe, is anything an educator says or does to make a student feel guilty, humiliated, or remorseful so that the student will never behave that way again (Hall & Braun, 1988).

A key to building a relationship, however, is not punishing the student—ever. Why not? Because punishment strains or even breaks the bond between teacher and student. Punishment may temporarily control behavior, but it does nothing to teach the student an appropriate response. Worse, punishing a student often instills a desire for revenge. An effective response to behavior that threatens health, safety, property, or basic rights does not include doling out punishment.

That evening, Ms. Hubble phoned Andreen's mother. She did not phone to report the chocolate milk incident. Instead, she asked permission to spend some special time with Andreen. Ms. Hubble said,

Many of the girls in class are coming to school with their hair in braids. It's the in thing. I would love to help Andreen put her hair in braids, if she wants. Would the two of us have your permission to do that?
The mother, of course, granted permission. "Please share our conversation with Andreen," Ms. Hubble concluded.

**Bonding**

The next day, Ms. Hubble devoted time to another key principle of relationship building—some call it *bonding* (McGee, Menolascino, Hobbs, & Menousek, 1987). To bond, we value the student for the socially appropriate behaviors that the student can demonstrate and then provide the structure, support, and recognition that the student needs to demonstrate these behaviors. During this bonding time, the adult does not place any expectations on the student for doing the activity the "right" way.

The activity provides opportunities for the adult to value the student, which enhances the student's sense of self-worth and encourages the development of internal standards for behavior. Moreover, when a teacher values a student, the student seems to be biologically inhibited from acting aggressively against that teacher. While the student is in this zone of positive regard, she is disposed to attend to the teacher. Expanding the zone of positive regard mitigates noncompliance and defiance.

That morning, Ms. Hubble talked privately to Andreen:

> We can wash and comb your hair during the lunch break and then braid it during afternoon recess. Is that something you'd like to do?

And that is what they did. As they ate lunch privately in the classroom, the two of them chatted up a storm. They talked about anything that the little girl had on her mind, even for a fleeting instant. Ms. Hubble used the conversation not to pry, but rather to enter, by invitation only, into Andreen's world of interests, experiences, and thoughts. Some might call their student-driven conversation trite and meaningless. It wasn't. The conversation and the hair washing were a vehicle for Ms. Hubble to bond with Andreen.

The relationship that Ms. Hubble and Andreen developed that day had immediate results. When the other students saw that Ms. Hubble valued the new girl, they shifted their attitude. Several girls complimented Andreen on her braids and slowly began to take the new girl into their fold.

**Ensuring Success**

Ensuring success means providing the student with the structure and support for becoming a good learner. When students, especially those with difficult temperaments, fail at learning tasks, they often explode into defiant behaviors. On the day of the chocolate milk incident, Ms. Hubble retrieved the math assignment that Andreen had torn to pieces, carefully taped the paper together, identified the specific math skill that Andreen was missing, and began to address the problem with targeted instruction.

**The New Paradigm**

By implementing these relationship-building principles, Ms. Hubble enabled Andreen to change her behavior and attitude. When Andreen came into the classroom each morning, she no longer hung her head and scowled. She did not push or kick students who passed by her desk;
rather, she smiled at them. When Ms. Hubble made a request, Andreen usually complied. Rather than tearing up her papers, Andreen took them home to show her mother. In Ms. Hubble's classroom, the relationship building with Andreen paid dividends.

Building relationships with students who have challenging behaviors is consistent with an emerging paradigm in education. In the old paradigm, educators developed behavior programs designed to squelch students' inappropriate behaviors, a process that focused on what the student was doing wrong. Educators assumed that when they had brought the inappropriate behaviors under control, the student would automatically demonstrate socially appropriate behaviors. Behavior programming typically contained objectives like "Andrew will decrease (or increase) this behavior," an approach that put most of the responsibility for behavior change on the student—the least capable person in the classroom.

In contrast, a relationship-building approach helps the student develop positive, socially appropriate behaviors by focusing on what the student is doing right. In the new paradigm, behavior programming puts the initial responsibility for behavior change on the teacher, the most capable and only professionally trained person in the classroom. The relationship-building approach more often leads to success.

References


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